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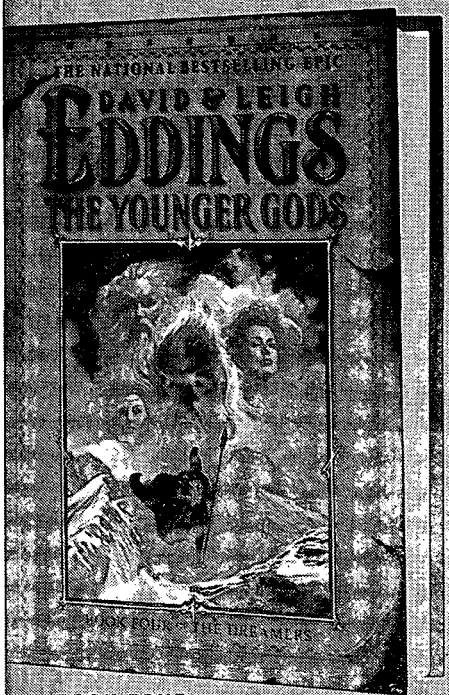

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THE MAGAZINE OF

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October/November • 58th Year of Publication

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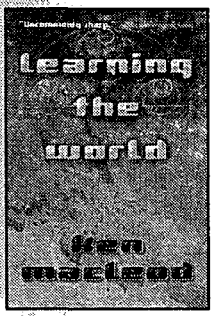

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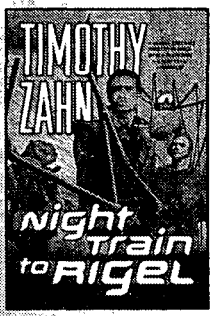

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EDITORIAL

GORDON VAN GELDER

THE TV SHOW *Star Trek* is celebrating its fortieth anniversary this year, and since it made its debut in the world at large on the same day I did, I thought I'd use the occasion as an excuse to reflect on a few of the things I've learned from running *F&SF*.

1) Don't name a company after a genus of skunk unless you want people to ask why.

It's a tribute to my father, whose doctoral dissertation was a taxonomic revision of the genus spilogale. Now you know.

2) Editing is child's play.

Really. I became a father in March and Zoe enjoys sitting in the submissions pile. Sometimes she drools on a manuscript and those get published. The ones she spits up on, well...

3) Be sure to include all the punctuation when you publish an issue.

People still marvel at copies of the April 2001 issue that were printed without any periods. I remain grateful to the person who dubbed us "the unperiodical."

4) Even Jove nods. But readers don't.

Never ever think you can put one over on the readers.

5) Give good value for the money.

Our cover price goes up with the next issue. The guy wearing the publisher's hat around here (that would be me) was sweating over it until someone took me by the hand and showed me what paperbacks and other magazines are selling for now.

6) Almost no one reads the classified ads.

Either that, or the fake ads we've been inserting for the last two years aren't as funny as I think they are.

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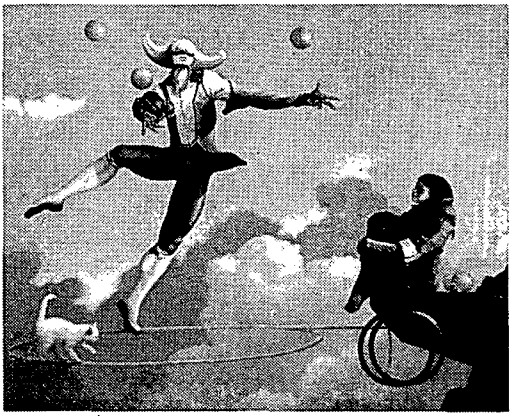
PARASPHERES

EXTENDING BEYOND THE SPHERES OF LITERARY AND GENRE FICTION



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7) You're never as funny as you think you are.

I learned that from a classified ad.

8) Make sure you have something to appear on every page of every issue.

Yeah, this one sounds obvious, but it still needs to be said often. And it leads to the next one:

9) Hire well.

Without my sharp-eyed, hard working colleagues, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* would probably deserve a new name: *Shambles.*

10) The world changes fast.

Three months ago, I tried an experiment in the blogsphere and gave away copies of *F&SF* to the first fifty people who offered to blog about the issue. Within minutes, the news of the promotion was all over the internet. Within hours, the copies were claimed. And within two weeks, it seemed like the experiment was forgotten.

11)...the more they stay the same.

After editing this magazine for almost ten years (can you believe it?), I go back occasionally and reread issues from the '50s and '60s. I hope we're still on the same basic track we set out on in 1949.

12) The work remains.

Okay, I knew this one before I started running *F&SF.* But it was driven home again by the recent deaths of John Morressy and Arthur Porges. There are some issues I can't look at without thinking of departed friends like Ron Walotsky and Judy Merril. I like to think that contributors who are no longer with us still help determine the direction the magazine takes.

13) This business is fun.

Sure, there's a lot of hard work involved. But whether it's reading a new story, talking with a subscriber, or getting into a particularly spirited discussion on our message board, I'm reminded of this little lesson every day.

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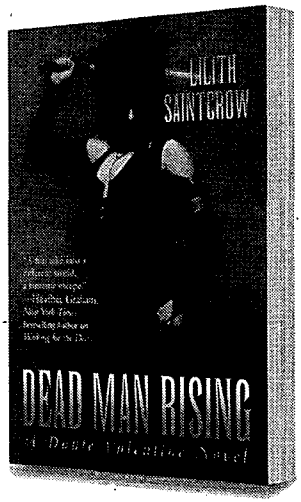
Magic and Murder. Together Again.



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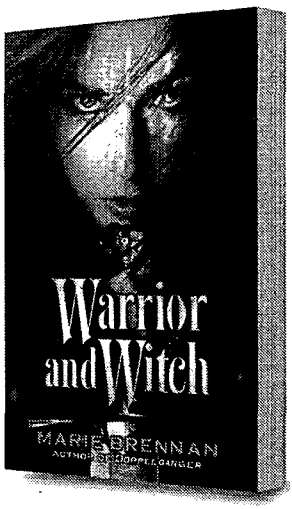

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Despite having had to spend several post-Katrina months in a rented home, Albert Cowdrey hasn't let the hurricane affect his writing output. His new story is a sharp one that's liable to have special appeal to anyone who ever took a course in the art of writing fiction. Your editor notes that when this story arrived in our offices, it bore a cryptic note at the end: "A-. Not incoherent enough. Addle that yolk more."

Revelation

By Albert E. Cowdrey

GORSHIN JOINED DREA AT his usual table in the Federal City Wine Cellar, inhaled a dark red half inch of Mondo Rosso Cabernet from a Wal-Mart goblet, and began to denounce his patients.

"Phil, you don't know what it's like, having to listen to a bunch of goddamn nuts all day."

He had a bass-drum voice and a build to match. His drinking buddy was thin, waspish, and bitter as only an overage campus radical could be.

"I have to read the rubbish my students write," protested Drea, "and I get paid roughly ten percent of what you make."

Gorshin paid no attention. When soliloquizing he was as unstoppable as Hamlet.

"Even my favorite screwball is getting to be a pain in the butt. I mean, here I am, one of a tiny shrinking band of Freudians — no pun intended — encircled by the howling Indians of drug therapy. So I finally get the perfect patient, intelligent, good rapport, with a truly original paranoid

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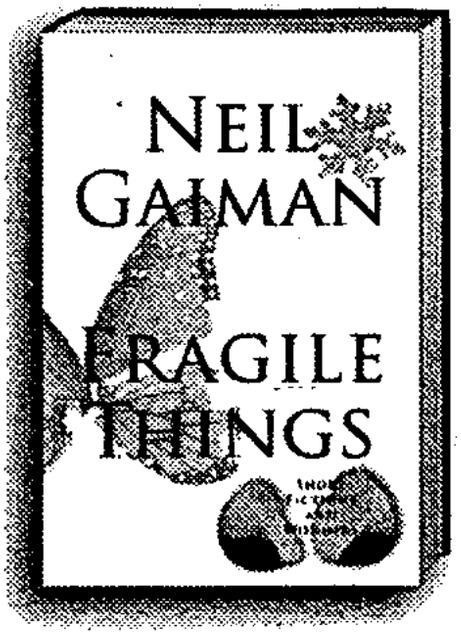

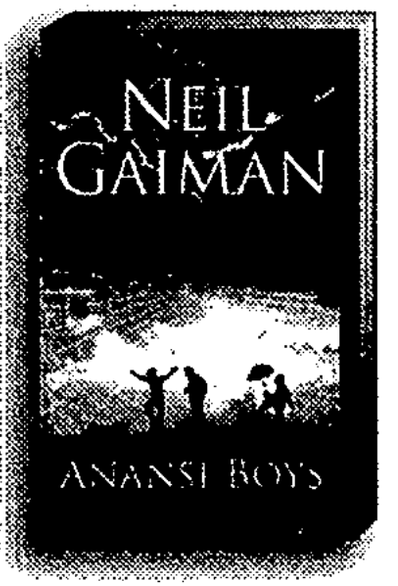

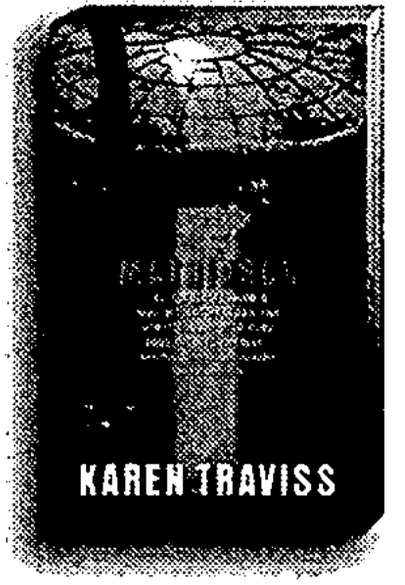

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the KGB's trying to control their brains by beaming radio broadcasts to the fillings in their teeth, or — "

"My patient thinks," said Gorshin slowly, "that the Earth is an egg."

That got Drea's attention. "The Earth is an *egg*?"

Involuntarily he raised his eyes and looked over the hump of Gorshin's left shoulder. At the opposite end of the Cellar a Sony HD was broadcasting the evening news to boozers at the bar. A picture sent back by the Mars Orbiter stared from the screen like an inflamed eye. *Okay*, thought Drea, finding a grain of logic in the fantasy, *planets are slightly ovate — and come to think of it, ovate means egg-shaped —*

"Yes, an egg," Gorshin rumbled on. "It was laid gazillions of years ago by a huge cosmic beast that my patient calls the Mother Dragon."

"Look, if a Freudian can't make something out of that, you ought to take down your shingle."

"All the inner planets are eggs," he continued, flattening Drea's interjection like a Hummer ironing out a motorbike. "That's why they're so different from the outer planets. Only one's hatched so far — that's where the Asteroid Belt is today. He thinks Mercury and Venus probably won't hatch at all, because they're too close to the sun and the embryo dragons — he calls them 'dragonets' — have gotten cooked inside their shells. But the Earth is sort of like the porridge in the Goldilocks story that wasn't too hot and wasn't too cold: it was just right."

"So if we're just right, why haven't we hatched yet?"

"That's why he's got acute anxiety symptoms. He thinks we're just about to. He says global warming is a sign. He says it's not caused by greenhouse gases at all, it's caused by the friction of our dragonet moving around inside its shell, preparing to bust out. Every time my patient hears

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"It's a bump that young crocs get on the ends of their noses to help them break out of their shells. I tell you, Phil, I love this guy. His delusional system is such a welcome break from the usual run of crap I have to listen to, it's almost a shame to cure him. But that's my job, and he really wants help, he wants to be freed from his crippling fear that the Earth will disintegrate when the dragonet breaks out at last. He's paying me a ton of money to help him shake it, and I feel like I'm failing in my duty, which, because of my anal-retentive upbringing, is a real issue with me."

"You drink enough red wine," Drea assured him, "and you won't be any kind of retentive, believe me."

A week had passed and the conversation at the Cellar had been forgotten when Drea greeted the first session of the new semester's seminar in Creative Writing.

In the English department of Aaron Burr University (Silver Spring Campus) he was known as Dr. Dread, a reputation he treasured because it kept his classes from becoming overcrowded. His current crop numbered nine, and he gazed at them with distaste.

Most were as grungy as Serbian Army conscripts. But not quite all. One black guy displayed precise cornrows, a sculpted goatee, and little pale blue expensive-looking shades; he had a touch of the lean dark Malcolm X look, as if he'd started life as an AK-47. Farther down the scarred seminar table sat a white guy looking neat and earnest as a Mormon stockbroker. A Brooks Brothers label was almost visible through the nubby cloth of his conservative jacket, and his well-scrubbed face shone limpidly fair, like an acolyte of some suburban preacher.

Briefly Drea fantasized having the two of them dipped in bronze and displayed in a campus chapel dedicated to the great god Diversity. Their names fit them neatly: when Drea, calling the meager roll, reached U. Pierson Clyde, the stockbroker made a strangled sound that might have been "here." When he reached Inshallah Jones, the AK-47 didn't answer at all — just raised one long beige hand about three inches off the tabletop and let it drop soundlessly back.

The students had been instructed to bring a sample of their work to the first class, and Drea watched gloomily as a growing heap of paper slid toward him along the table like a gathering wave. Most of the manuscripts

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were fat as American children in training for a diabetic future, and — Drea was willing to bet — florid with the acne of adolescent prose.

But U. Pierson Clyde, bless him, contributed a plastic-jacketed manuscript that was thin to the point of bulimia, while Inshallah Jones tossed down a tubular scroll secured by a rubber band. Drea conceived a faint hope that good things might come in small packages.

Well, he'd find out soon enough. Right now it was time to put the class through the get-acquainted ritual. One by one, they rose to mumble their names and backgrounds and longings for World Peace, while he, like an experienced teacher, dozed.

He woke twice. The first time when Jones revealed that he'd grown up in the Anacostia Project, which was truly impressive; in that neighborhood, a kid who contracted literacy was marked for almost certain death. Drea woke the second time when U. Pierson Clyde, his voice trembling yet under tense control, revealed that he'd joined the class at the urging of his shrink.

"Dr. Gorshin said that if I wrote things out, I might find it easier to objectify my fantasies and see them for what they are," U said.

This confession drew only bored glances from the other students, most of whom had been seeing therapists since they wore Huggies. But it enraged Drea.

That goddamn witch doctor, he thought, his small bloodshot eyes getting smaller and redder yet. *He's getting paid five hundred bucks an hour for curing this nut, and now he wants me to do his job for him!* Resentment rising inside him like acid reflux, he resolved to hit U's work with comments so scathing that he'd drop the course and join the queue at the lobotomy counter in Gorshin's clinic.

Fifteen minutes later, the class dismissed, Drea entered his musty office with its thrift-store furnishings, its odor of dead pipes that lingered though he hadn't smoked for a decade, its thousand or so dust-veiled volumes of literature and criticism and other rubbish he'd studied for his Ph.D. in 1971, and never opened since.

He sat down in a semi-defunct swivel chair, prepared to do execution, flicked back the neat plastic cover of U's work and gazed with remorseless eye at the title, "Revelation." The byline gave the author's full name — Uriel Pierson Clyde — and unexpectedly his rage began to abate.

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A passionate liberal reformer in his youth, Drea had almost exhausted his lifetime supply of empathy before the age of forty. Yet a few tiny drops lingered in the dry chambers of his heart: racism still made him fume, and he still pitied people who had to go through the hell of childhood additionally burdened with an oddball name. The reason was his own: Philbert. His namesake, shrewd Aunt Philberta who'd founded a string of weight-control salons that successfully thinned bank accounts, was supposed to (but didn't) leave him a bunch of money. All she'd left him was the joy of being known as Filbert the Nut until he was old enough to vote.

Now, gazing at Uriel's paper, he tried to imagine what life must have been like for a kid who had to fight his way through school being addressed as Urinal Pee. Was this the root of the lad's psychiatric problems?

His tide of bile receding, Drea began to read "Revelation," now rather hoping that he would not have to flay its author alive.

The cosmic egg has an addled yolk — Henry Miller, read the epigraph. Drea liked that; he'd often thought the same thing.

Alas, the story itself was a mishmash. The hero, Jamie Cassandra, was a Poor Little Rich Boy with a menu of all the usual symptoms — sexual confusion, obscure phobias, chemical dependency — the sort of baffled youth without whom Gorshin wouldn't own his condo at Cozumel.

At unpredictable moments, however, Jamie morphed into an unrecognized prophet, trying to warn the human race about a danger only he could see: the Earth was going to hatch. After some pointless plot complications (inconclusive fondling by an elderly male relative, quarrels with a ditzy wife he'd married at seventeen to convince himself he wasn't gay) Jamie came to realize that warning the world was pointless. He couldn't save it, and it couldn't save itself. On that note the story didn't exactly end — it petered out.

Though tempted to live up to his Dr. Dread image by scrawling across U's paper *This is the most incoherent farrago of rubbish I have encountered during decades of scanning undergraduate drivel,* Drea put "Revelation" aside for mature consideration. And not only because of U's presumably miserable childhood. Despite its gross deficiencies, there was something about this battered torso of a tale. Some quality of... authentic...desperation? Something, anyway, that made it stick.

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Among Drea's most deeply guarded secrets was the fact that he still hoped, sometime before he died, to find and nurture a real talent. U seemed a most unlikely candidate, but still he wanted to think "Revelation" over, and meanwhile went on to the other papers.

In general they covered a narrow range from babbling fluency to utter incoherence. Inshallah's was, as he'd hoped, an exception. The man actually could spell, though where he'd learned was a mystery to Drea, who like most residents of Montgomery County believed firmly that District of Columbia public schools taught only two things well, Shooting and Shooting Up.

Still more improbably, his student had been reading Kipling, from whom he filched his title, "The City of the Dreadful Night." Drea was dazzled by what followed. Inshallah's account of one stifling August night under the staring vapor lamps in the concrete-and-sooty-brick maze of the Anacostia Project was like listening to what rap might be if it lacked rhyme and possessed a soul. No wonder the man resembled an assault rifle; that was how he used language. Drea was able to write at the end of the paper the rarest of all professorial comments — "With minor changes, this ought to be publishable."

Finally, as the shadows of evening lengthened over Silver Spring — a traffic-throttled Maryland burb conspicuous for its lack of either silver or springs — he got back to Uriel, or U as he'd begun to think of him. The basic problem, he concluded, was that U was mixing up his story with his analysis, thus creating a sort of chimera that was false as a confession and incoherent as a tale.

On the last page of "Revelation" Drea wrote, "Forget Jamie's damn sex problems and tell me why a rather banal young man with limited intelligence and an unlimited trust fund came to believe in the existence of a cosmic dragon."

See if that does any good.

Then Drea locked up, climbed into his battered Toyota, and headed south on Georgia Avenue to the Federal City Wine Cellar. Gorshin had left his office — appropriately located in Foggy Bottom — early, and was already overflowing his usual chair while glancing over his shoulder at the evening news. Tonight the Sony's screen exhibited a huge red valley tucked beneath the towering mountains of Mars.

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"For some reason," he commented as Drea sat down, "that reminds me of Caitlin."

"Why don't you ever stay home with her?" Drea asked, inserting his lips into his first goblet of Mondo Rosso. "She is your wife, after all."

"Not anymore. She left me last year. Didn't I tell you?"

"No. You also didn't tell me you were sending U. Pierson Clyde to my class so I could do your job for you."

"He's an interesting guy, isn't he? I mean, as loons go."

"Don't evade the issue. You're the one being paid to shrink his head, not me. Then why do I have to read his stuff?"

"Look, I'll buy you a case of Mondo Rosso. Deal?"

"Deal."

Gorshin asked if he had any other interesting students this year, and Drea told him about Inshallah Jones, whom he described as "a remarkable young black man."

"Young male *African Americans,*" Gorshin said reprovingly, because Drea hadn't used the currently okay designation, "have terrible castration issues. It's on account of those old African American women who raise them. That's why they explode in violence if you look at them crooked. Or even if you don't."

"Without those old women they'd all be dead before the age of one."

"Yes, and better off, too," said the Dr. Mengele of the Wine Cellar. "I'm just saying, keep an eye on him."

Drea sat gazing at Gorshin, noticing for the first time that despite the breadth of his fat face, his eyes were so close together that only his nose stopped them from overlapping.

Why did Drea associate with him? Had a mere busted marriage and a dead-end career and a grown son who preferred not to speak to him so completely emptied his life that he had to fill it with Gorshin and cheap wine? Was he that lonely?

Well, of course they had. And of course he was.

"Believe me," he said at last, "I intend to keep an eye on him."

If he'd been marking his own conversation, he'd have scrawled *Awfully weak* on this poor excuse for a comeback.

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Like all members of the Academic Community, Drea filled his days by drinking coffee, a schedule interrupted only by occasional hours wasted in class and necessary trips to the bathroom.

The day after he returned the Creative Writing bunch their papers, Drea was in the student center drinking a cup of caffeine-and-saccharine-flavored mud at his favorite table overlooking the glassed-in swimming pool. He liked to sit there, eyeballing the sort of shapely young women who, perhaps warned by a website called gropingprofs.edu, never took his classes.

"Can I sit down?" asked a voice, and without waiting for an answer, U sat down.

He'd shed his young-broker attire and donned casual clothes, in which he appeared even more of a lank, flaxen-haired nonentity than before.

"Please do," Drea muttered, with what he thought was irony. It went unnoticed.

"You, uh, uh, asked me about the dragon, Dr. Dread," U said, and instantly turned scarlet.

"My name is Drea, Philbert Eugene Drea. Dr. Dread is merely what people call me."

U turned even brighter, a kind of neon, and for the moment appeared to be completely deprived of the power of speech. Drea sat there in silence, enjoying the discomfort of this blushing nut who'd invaded his private space.

"I consider the name a compliment," he said finally, and gave U a Dan Rather-type smile, stretching without elevating the corners of his mouth.

Uncertainly U smiled back. The flood of scarlet ebbed from his face and his tongue became functional.

"I, I, uh, uh, can't tell you where the dragon came from, Dr. Drea, because I really don't know. I've explained that over and over and over to my therapists, and every time I do they try to make me say something that just isn't true."

"I am not interested in true truth, I am interested in fictional truth — " Drea began. But U, like a Gorshin in training, promptly overwhelmed him with a flood of chatter.

"See, Dr. Drea, I used to do codeine."

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"Just like Jamie Cassandra. What a surprise."

"It wasn't good for me."

"No, I don't suppose it was."

"It practically wrecked my life. My wife Brittany left me on account of it."

"You were married to a spaniel?" Drea jested. But U rushed on, unheeding.

"Even her leaving didn't make me stop. It was my toothbrush did it. I was standing in my bathroom one morning about six months ago, I guess I was there for a couple of hours, and *I couldn't find my toothbrush.* That was when I realized I needed help, and checked myself into rehab at Georgetown Hospital."

"A shocking experience."

"I mean, it was staring me in the face, yet I couldn't find it. Well, after they detoxed me, the people in rehab recommended long-term therapy and sent me to a lady shrink. She asked me just what you did, where did the dragon come from, and when I couldn't tell her she tried to make me admit that I invented it during a drug-induced psychotic episode. But she was wrong. It was thinking about the dragon that started me taking codeine. The addiction was the effect, not the cause."

"So you switched from the drug lady to Gorshin."

"Yeah, and at first I thought I'd found the right shrink at last. He agreed with me that drugs were just a symptom of deeper problems. He thought — "

"Castration," Drea muttered.

"What?"

"He thought the underlying cause was castration anxiety."

"How'd you know? He thinks I'm the dragonet, and the Earth is the womb — Mother Earth, you know — and in bursting through the shell I'd be escaping from the castrating influence of mother love. He says I want to escape and achieve autonomous phallic maturity, but at the same time I'm afraid to, and the conflict is what's causing my anxiety. But he's wrong too."

"Gorshin is right only at long intervals, when the laws of probability catch up with him. Did you know he's been married six times? *Six.* Most people become immune to the bug after one or two exposures, but with

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Gorshin it's like the flu, it comes back every February...: Why, specifically, is he wrong this time?"

"Well, Mama died when I was three hours old, and I don't see how she could've done much castrating in such a short amount of time."

"Who raised you?"

"Oh, a bunch of nannies, a Ukrainian au pair named Olga, Daddy until he died, some of his mistresses, my Uncle Uriel, two or three Catholic boarding schools, and whatnot."

To Drea that sounded about right as a breeding ground of lunacy. He asked if U would like a cup of coffee, but he said no, caffeine made him hyperventilate.

"The truth is," he went on, his eyes taking on the thousand-yard stare of introspection, "it really baffles me, not knowing where the dragon came from. As a kid I always liked scaly critters, because they were kind of outcasts and rejects, like me. I loved dinosaurs — wanted to be an Allosaurus when I grew up, and eat people. I used to keep pet snakes in a toilet at St. Mark's until the Prefect of Discipline found out and flushed them. Later on, when Brittany wanted us to get matching tattoos as a sign of eternal commitment, I suggested twining rattlers. But she insisted on the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Now she's gone, and I've got the Sacred Heart on my left deltoid and I'm not even a Catholic anymore."

In spite of himself, Drea had gotten interested in this naïve recital. He asked when the dragon business started.

"When? Whenever the Loma Prieta earthquake happened. Ninety-five? I don't remember. Anyway, they kept showing the scenes over and over and over on TV, and suddenly I just flashed on the fact that a dragon had caused it, a dragon down under the Earth. Of course, my first thought was *that's ridiculous*. But the idea kept coming back to me, and it kind of grew, because it seemed to explain so much — earthquakes and floods and global warming and the Asteroid Belt and so forth.

"I began to feel like for the first time in my life I'd discovered something terribly basic and terribly important. The existence of an embryo dragon implied a mother, so I started calling the little guy a dragonet, and I dreamed about him. I saw the dragonet coiled up inside the Earth like a baby snake in its egg, and from time to time it moved, and when it did, the Earth shook.

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"When the big tsunami hit Asia the day after Christmas '04, that was when I went on codeine. Because on the twenty-fifth, Christ had his birthday, and on the twenty-sixth, Antichrist tapped the Earth with his egg tooth. I mean the real A.C., the one that's going to finish us all off. Then the next year global warming caused that big hurricane that wiped out New Orleans. That's what all those screwy old prophets of the Last Days dimly foresaw—devastation, the Four Horsemen, the dragon breaking out of the Earth. They thought God would bind him for a thousand years, as in Revelation 20:2, only there isn't any God. So all those dead people, they're just a down payment on what's going to happen."

After his outburst U sat in silence while the filmy cataracts of self-absorption slowly cleared from his eyes, which were grayish or bluish, it was hard to tell which. He finished sadly, "I guess now you think I'm insane, too, Dr. Drea."

"Yes. But that's your business and Gorshin's — who, by the way, you ought to ditch instantly. There *are* rational shrinks, you know. My business is with your story, about one percent of which is worth saving. Can I make a suggestion?"

"Sure."

"Go home. Dig your story out. Try to forget about yourself for half an hour — forty-five minutes, if possible. Your hero is Jamie Cassandra, not Uriel Pierson Clyde, and for the sake of the story you need to devise a plausible scenario to explain what made Jamie believe in his dragon. Not your dragon: *his*. I hate to tell you this, but fiction consists in making things up. So go home and make something up."

"I don't want to say anything unless it's absolutely true — "

Drea's temper was none too certain at the best of times, and at this he lost it.

"A storyteller has no more to do with truth than a lawyer has. The lawyer's business is advocacy; the storyteller's is plausibility. Now," Drea concluded, "go away. I'm getting old, and voyeurism is the only kind of sex I can really count on anymore. Will you look at that thong down there with the girl inside it?"

U got up, but seemed troubled. "I thought creative writing meant, you know, spilling your guts," he muttered. "That's why I joined your class."

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"Nobody wants to look at a pile of guts except Gorshin, who makes a fortune doing it despite being crazier than you'll ever be. Now scram."

U did. The thong started practicing two-and-a-half backflips, or whatever the proper term was. Drea got himself another cup of mud and settled down to watch.

U WAS ABSENT from the next class meeting, which was too bad because it contained some lively moments.

Drea passed xeroxes of Inshallah's "City of the Dreadful Night" to the other students as a model for their own work. Some gazed at the author with awe, others with hatred — such were the penalties of success. With Inshallah's permission, Drea had already sent the manuscript to an agent he knew, who didn't usually handle short fiction but might, he hoped, make an exception in this case.

"If you imitate Mr. Jones," Drea told the class, "I'll flunk you straight off. Don't imitate, emulate. He seems to have found his voice — what I want you to do is look around for yours."

That launched the kind of free-for-all teachers dream of. The students peppered Inshallah with questions, and he rapped back with a fluent mix of psychobabble and street language. This was a guy who could make two syllables out of a four-syllable obscenity, yet include in the same sentence words like "polymorphous" and "subliminal" — properly used, at that.

His story, he said, had been drawn directly from his life, and he told about his young days in the Project, dealing drugs, dodging bullets, visiting the fortified home of a big supplier in Potomac Estates where people were filling plastic garbage bags with money and weighing it because counting took too much time. About how he stopped dealing after his brother Shabazz got shot and bled to death in his arms. About how the raging need to memorialize him burst out at last in the struggle to write.

It was great stuff. Gazing dreamily at his prize pupil, Dr. Dread, terror of the English Department, who spent his life stewed in wine and cynicism, wondered whether this moment of — well, of epiphany — gave meaning to his otherwise wasted life as a teacher.

And then, without warning, his critical faculty came to life. *Inshallah was making it all up.*

"The City of the Dreadful Night" wasn't any more original than its

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title. It just seemed so because of that machine-gun style its author had probably caught — in the same sense that you catch a cold — by listening to rap, deleting the drums and rhymes and spilling it on a page as prose.

His glasses were too expensive, his beard too sculptural, his cornrows too neat, he could spell, he spouted polysyllables, he'd read Kipling — this was no child of the Project. Then why was he lying? Couldn't he just say, Hey, I grew up in a condo in the Watergate, and let the story stand by itself?

Before leaving the campus after class, Drea stopped at the registrar's office and looked up Inshallah's records. He'd graduated from Bunche-Mandela, a pricey private school that specialized in grooming the children of black professionals for success. He lived with his parents in the so-called Gold Coast on the edge of Rock Creek Park, where *café-au-lait* politicians, businessmen, city administrators, top-ranked bureaucrats and presidents of historically black colleges lamented racism while sipping double scotches beside their swimming pools.

By the time Drea reached the Cellar his sense of gallows humor had taken over. After all, he'd been right the first time: life really was a fraud. And so was literature. There was nothing to do but enjoy it, and of course drink. Full of *Schadenfreude*, he was slurping down Mondo Rosso and grinning like a satanic Happy Face when Gorshin came in and sat down.

He was looking happy, too. "Can't stay long tonight," he said.

"Why not?"

"I'm getting married again. Marvelous woman named Leila or Delilah or something. Met her today in Georgetown Foods. In the meat department."

Drea congratulated him while Gorshin quaffed the single glass he said he would allow himself tonight. Then snapped his fingers.

"By the way. Almost forgot to tell you. Clyde's been hospitalized. At Georgetown. Mixed codeine and vodka, OD'd, almost died. Maybe a suicide attempt. What the hell did you say to him, anyway? He's out of the ER now and resting in the ICU. I'd look in on him, but Delilah and I are flying to Vegas tonight. Krishnamurti will cover for me."

"ER? ICU? Delilah? Vegas? Krishna — what the hell do you mean, what did *I* say to him?"

"Got to run," said Gorshin, and did.

Next day, Drea phoned the hospital and, after interminable delays,

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got to speak for thirty seconds to Dr. Krishnamurti. The news was good: U was out of intensive care, resting comfortably, and could see visitors in another day or two.

"It would be good if you came to see him," said the fluent accents of Bombay. "I believe he is quite isolated, which is unfortunate in so young a man."

"I suppose he's driven all his friends away, talking about his dragon."

"Either that or talking about his analysis," said Krishnamurti dryly.

When Drea saw U again, he was wearing maroon PJ's and a blue terrycloth robe and sitting on a bench in a solarium on the ninth floor of Georgetown Hospital. A ray of sunlight penetrating the dusty glass made him look almost translucent; like drugs, suicide had not agreed with him.

"How are you?" Drea asked, shaking his lax and nerveless hand.

"Oh...okay, I guess. Just don't ask me to coagulate."

"Er...all right."

"I'm better, but I can't coagulate yet. I can't coagulate my thoughts. It's my prescription. It's an anticoagulant. It's like I can think of A, or B, or J, but how they connect I don't know."

"I'm sure you'll be doing better soon."

"Jesus, I hope so. I feel like such a fool, almost losing my life worrying about a dragonet who may not even exist."

"You remember that, then."

"Oh hell, I remember everything — well, not your name, but everything else — only I can't coagulate. I can't draw conclusions. Why don't you sit down?"

It had been so long since Drea tried to comfort anyone that his machinery of empathy had frozen up. He was sitting at the end of the bench, trying to think of something to say, when U relieved him of the embarrassment of being nice by falling sleep.

Suddenly his head slumped to one side and he began to snore. Drea was used to having students nod off, so he just sat there for a while, resting. When a male nurse came by, wearing green scrubs and thick fur on his stumpy forearms, Drea stopped him and asked in a low voice if U was going to be all right.

"Yeah, until the next time he tries it," said the nurse, and headed

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through a door marked HOSPITAL PERSONNEL ONLY. From inside came the hum of a microwave and the odor of chicken-noodle soup.

Next day Drea got a call from his agent pal.

"Absolutely brilliant," he burbled. "That story by Allah whoever. Terrific! I won't make a dime on it, but I'll try sending it around anyway."

"Marvelous," murmured Drea.

"Just one thing. This guy is black, right?"

"Absolutely."

"I just wanted to make sure. Sometimes, people find out somebody writing about the black experience isn't black, they feel cheated."

"Good thing Shakespeare didn't know that when he wrote *Othello.*"

"When who wrote what?"

"Nothing."

Just before the next class meeting, standing in a blank tiled hallway outside the seminar room, Drea told the news to Inshallah, whose blue shades grew misty with emotion.

"Awesome," he muttered. "Awesome, awesome."

On impulse, Drea also told him about his fellow student being hospitalized after a suicide attempt.

"I was thinking. Maybe if he could get off the dime with his story, it might help him with his other problems. And since you're a writer and young, and I'm not either one — "

"Oh man, I would be *so* happy to give this screwed-up dude a hand. You know, I been screwed up myself."

Next day they met at Georgetown and ascended to the ninth-floor solarium in an enormous elevator that also contained a fat man on a gurney and his gum-chewing attendant. Drea found U much improved. He could even coagulate again, and was proving it by working out a chess problem from the Washington *Post* in his head.

"How's it going?" asked Drea, and U said, "It starts Qh7 check. It's pretty easy."

He and Inshallah shook hands, and the latter immediately said, "Dr. Drea sold my story, and he says he could sell yours too, except you ran into some kind of a block."

The double lie acted on U like two swigs of Lourdes water.

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"Really? You're not kidding me? He said that?" Apparently asking Drea, who was located about a yard distant, never occurred to him. He was staring at Inshallah like a wild pig at an anaconda, both fascinated and fearful.

"Yes, he did. Now what exactly is your story about?"

U told him, phrasing it to make it seem like nothing he would ever dream of actually believing himself.

"Jeeeeeeeeeesus," breathed Inshallah, "that is such a treeemendous idea! Where'd you get it from?"

"It just came to me," said U modestly.

"Wow! I mean, look, all I do is — I'm like Tom Wolfe: I just report back what I hear on the streets. But you, man, you are like Edgar Allan Poe, wild stuff comes to you out the air. So what is your problem?"

"Well, Dr. Drea says I have to explain to the reader where Jamie Cassandra got his vision of the dragonet. That's not totally honest, because I really don't know where it came from — "

"No, no, no, no!" exclaimed Inshallah. "When you write, man, you invent a parallel universe. So you need an explanation to create a sense of 'reality,' a word Nabokov says means nothing unless it's between quotes."

Enlightenment spread over U's pale countenance. "Oh yeah, right. He said that in his essay 'On a Book Called *Lolita*.'"

"As for your problem, man, that is so simple. Just haul out the old ESP. I mean, you named this dude Jamie Cassandra, right? Maybe a little sexual ambivalence there, which is good in itself. But the point is that Cassandra was the prophet nobody would believe."

"Right. In the *Odyssey*."

"No, man. The *Iliad*."

They wrangled over this for a few minutes, then turned to Drea. Called upon for the first time to intrude on this astounding conversation, he muttered, "Actually, I think it was the *Aeneid*."

Both young men instantly dismissed this information. "Whatever," they exclaimed in chorus, and went back to their dialogue.

"Anyway, you start with one of those canned scenes, everybody been doing it for eons now, where Jamie learns he has visions like Haley Joel Osment. I can see the trailer for the movie now. Then — "

"You know," U interrupted, "when I was little I really *did* see visions

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of things that weren't there. Like Daddy dropping dead in the lobby of the Metropolitan, or Uncle Uriel kissing the mailman behind the garden wall."

"Really? You had the gift? How'd you lose it?"

"Therapy. They started me on it when I was seven."

"Oh yeah, that'll do it.... But look, that means you got a personal experience to build on, and that's important, right, Dr. Drea?"

Drea, having learned his place, said nothing. Meanwhile Inshallah and U were shaking hands in various complicated ways and promising to see each other again real, real soon.

As he and Inshallah were leaving the hospital, Drea said something about a friendship maybe developing out of this. Inshallah shook his head.

"No man, I'm too busy. He's a sweet dude, but I got no time for him. Besides writing, I'm an intern in Senator Frist's office, I'm entering Georgetown Law, and my woman needs me at night. Oh, you mean what we said? No, that's just something you say. It don't mean anything."

Before they parted, Drea asked Inshallah if he'd ever actually been in the Anacostia Project. His reply was perfectly unembarrassed.

"Just once. To buy some dope. That was back when I was screwed up. Even then I didn't want to hang with those dudes. They're suicide bombers, man. They just want to die and take somebody with them."

"Then why'd you claim you were born there when you weren't?"

"It's bull," Inshallah explained patiently, as if to a child. "It takes bull to get along in this world. Everybody needs a legend. Life, man, is something you make up."

"I think you ought to be teaching the seminar, not me," said Drea in a burst of candor.

"No, I don't have time for that either," Inshallah replied, and drove off in a new pearl-gray BMW his Daddy had given him.

Gorshin returned from his Vegas marriage and honeymoon, played husband for a few weeks, then started visiting the Wine Cellar again.

At first he brought his wife, whose actual name was Delia; Drea thought her far too sensible a woman to be stuck with Gorshin. Then he began leaving her at home. Drea gathered that not all was well in the new menage.

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"Phil, it's hard to listen to those goddamn nuts all day and her pointing out my flaws of character all night," Gorshin said, slurping down a goblet of Mondo Rosso in two gulps.

"You've got a lot of flaws for her to work on."

"She has a streak of violence, too. When we were shopping for groceries the other day, I told her she was the most blatant case of penis envy I've ever seen, and she started throwing canned goods at me."

"You should stay away from supermarkets. How are you and U getting along?"

"Me and who?"

"U. Pierson Clyde. The dragonet guy. He's out of the hospital and back in class, so — "

"Oh him. He quit me. He's going to Krishnamurti. Of course I respect a patient's right to choose his own physician, but I just don't think you can cross a cultural divide that wide in anything as personal as analysis."

"That's a nice way of saying Krishnamurti can't understand U's problems because Wog is Wog and White is White and never the twain shall meet."

"I have never, ever been a racist," declared Gorshin, believing it absolutely.

Meanwhile U's story was developing, not in the gentle quiet of the study, but under a withering barrage of criticism from his fellow students. The nine aspirants to literature read each other's work and, after some initial diffidence, began shredding it in a style which — if only they'd had a better grasp of English — would have been downright Oxfordian in ferocity.

Three people dropped out of class, unable to stand the gaff, and some (not all of them girls) went home in tears. But the survivors' work, if not exactly earth-shaking, became increasingly coherent and pointed.

Inshallah was especially fierce. Midway through the semester, a hip-hop magazine aggressively titled *In Yo Face* bought his story, made him cut it from 4,500 to 1,500 words, and renamed it "Nigga Project Rap." When his agent began shopping for a book deal, he became something of a terror at the seminar table, dispensing his opinions with a faith in his own infallibility that might have impressed His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI.

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Fortified by his new shrink, U survived and even throve in this bracing atmosphere. Gradually Jamie Cassandra took form as a true fictional hero — somebody who both was and wasn't his creator. Jamie became a man escaping from the chaos of his youth, while at the same time clinging fiercely to his ESP-inspired vision of disaster and trying to force it on an unbelieving world.

U's last problem was to find a bang-up ending. That came to him one night in a mysterious dream of vast, barren landscapes overlooked by a bloodshot sky. He jumped out of bed and almost wore out his PC, working until dawn. Drea, who knew how seldom night-time visions last into daylight, began reading the new coda with misgivings — which soon vanished.

Jamie Cassandra, giving up in despair his mission to alert humanity, decided to pursue his estranged wife Chelsea to California, where she'd taken refuge at an ashram run by her guru. Following the westward direction taken by the sun, the course of empire, and screwballs of all types, Jamie reached the Mojave Desert and checked into a tiny, rundown motel for the night.

U did a good job conveying the barren grandeur of Death Valley — the ringing silence; the insinuating whisper of windblown sand; the searing day when the world was half sun and half rock; the frigid night when Jamie's cabin seemed to rise and hover among the stars.

"That's not bad," Drea allowed after reading this far. "When were you in the desert?"

"Never," said U. "But it sounds so great, I might go."

There, in Death Valley, as Jamie strolled beneath the blazing panoply of the midnight sky, dreaming of a jewel that Chelsea wore in her navel and the greater jewel that she carried beneath it in what he termed her "moist and silken purse" — there, while Jamie's brain dreamed of love and his left hand tugged at his shorts — a sudden tremendous shock abruptly sent him sprawling on the gravel and dust of the desert floor.

He raised his head. Great dry swells, gray in the starlight, rose in the distance and rushed toward him like spreading waves before a storm. The motel went dark, then disintegrated into tincans and toothpicks. Jamie's car upended and plunged downward into the earth like a Frank Herbert sandworm.

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Miles away in the depths of the valley, the shell of the planet burst open and a vast structure like a flattened Everest rose — and rose — and rose, a wedge of blackness driven into the Milky Way. Alone among the desert rats, sidewinders, and tarantulas witnessing the monstrous birth, Jamie knew what he was gazing upon: *the egg tooth of the dragonet!* Thunderously the earth continued to fracture, canyons spreading in a crazy weblike pattern, while out of them erupted fountains of fire.

Unheard by any living thing, Jamie cried out — his last words before his own extinction — *"You dumb bastards! Maybe you'll believe me now!"*

"It's an adequate finish," Drea admitted. "Melodrama is the comfort food of the soul. Go with it."

"Well, I still don't feel that it's really true, I mean there's...I don't know...something that's still a little off about it. But if you think this version works — "

"It does. Try sending it to *Fantasy & Science Fiction*. I'll give you a covering note to the editor, Gordon Van Gelder. I met him someplace or other, I think in a bar."

At semester's end, Drea gave U an A- for strenuous endeavor, Inshallah an A+ for triumphant mendacity, and everybody else who was still in class a C- for durable mediocrity. Those who had dropped out too late to be eligible for I's he flunked, despite their pleas for mercy. Dr. Dread had his reputation to think of.

The night after handing in the grades, he found Gorshin already seated in the Federal City Wine Cellar, looking grim.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Delia left me today. Somewhere, somewhere in this world there's a sane, balanced woman I can spend the rest of my life with. I keep looking for her, but I always wind up with the wackos."

"What'd she do?"

"It's what she was thinking of doing. I know the signs."

"What was she thinking of doing?"

"Cutting off my penis while I'm asleep. Like that poor Wayne Bobbit character. I was afraid to go to sleep, and I can't face that parade of nuts all day long without eight solid hours."

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After gulping some wine, he added, "It's costing me three hundred dollars to get the locks changed so she can't sneak in at night and go for me with the blade from her Lady Elegance razor."

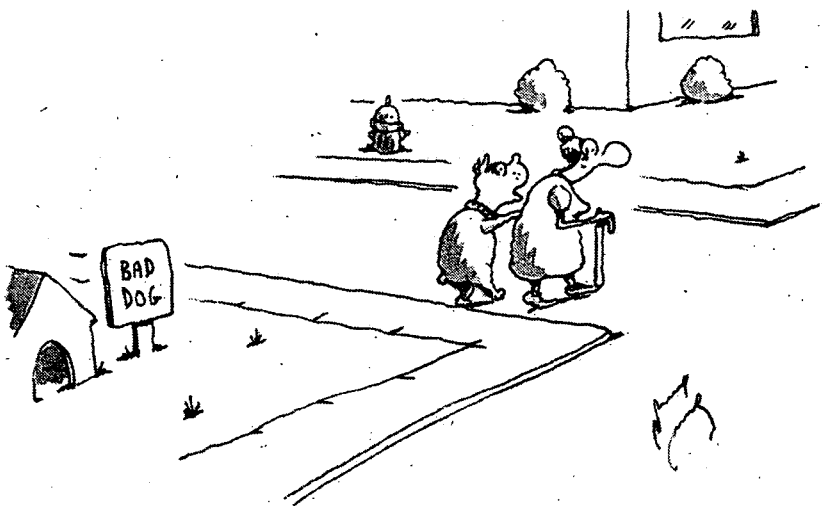
"Gorshin — "

"Don't try to comfort me," he said. "I'm feeling too lousy."

Drea wouldn't have dreamed of doing so. Instead, he sat sipping and musing on the events of the semester just past.

The more he thought about it, the more he respected U's fantasy. How satisfying it must be to believe that some magnificent primal beast laid the Earth to contain and shelter its young — that this noble and simple act is the whole meaning and purpose of our world — and that human beings, with all their bizarre kinks, are only a kind of microorganism growing on the outside of the soon-to-be-discarded shell.

Obscurely comforted, he raised his eyes over Gorshin's defeated bulk and rested his gaze on the Sony across the room. The latest signals from the Mars Orbiter were being broadcast, just as they arrived via Houston. Thus Drea happened to be one among the millions privileged to look on as the red planet split open along the sutures of its great barren valleys, and began to hatch.



"Not a word of this to anyone."

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Blood Knight, by Greg Keyes, Del Rey, 2006, $25.95.

IF THERE'S any sort of story that you think you dislike, there's always a book out there that will prove you wrong.

Regular readers of this column will know that I'm not particularly enamored with secondary world fantasy novels — especially not when they're presented in trilogies or series. I won't go into the whys and wherefores, except to reiterate briefly that I've read too many of this kind of story and can usually tell where it's going within a few chapters. Also, I don't like a book that can't resolve to at least some sort of a satisfying end.

So I was definitely not the target audience for Keyes's work when I picked up the first of this series, *The Briar King*, a few years ago. But I gave it a try nevertheless, and was hooked from the very beginning.

The main thing I like about Keyes's writing is that, in this series, he doesn't make a parade of the same old problems that plague too many secondary fantasy novels. Those problems could probably comprise a book in and of themselves — and they do. That book is Diana Wynne Jones's brilliant *Tough Guide to Fantasyland* in which all the tropes and beginners' mistakes are laid out, naked and blinking in the light of day. (It will have been reprinted by Firebird/Viking by the time you read this, in a fun package mimicking the "Rough Guide" series.) Explore its pages and you'll be surprised at how often even established writers get lazy, or don't think things through, or don't realize that fantasy isn't a war novel tricked out with elves and magic.

But getting back to *The Blood Knight*, let me say that Keyes knows what works.

Sure, there's a big, sprawling struggle on the go in this series, but

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it's the individuals who are important here, not armies moved across the landscape as though the books are playing boards or video games. There's variety as well, in the customs and mores of the different countries, in their religions, and he can write women characters as well as male — and they don't come off as men with breasts.

Best of all, lying at the heart of this series is a magic as wild and potent as what first brought many old-timers such as myself to this field. Keyes creates a sense of wonder in every page, and plays fair with that magic — as well as the plots and characterizations. And while these books (*The Blood Knight* is the third of four) are certainly each a part of a larger story, each one leaves the reader satisfied.

I'm being somewhat vague here in terms of referencing particular characters and plot situations, but that's only because this is an ongoing series and I don't want to spoil it for readers who might be intrigued by this particular book, but who have yet to pick up the others. Because, let me tell you, serious stuff happens to our cast from the previous books.

What I will say is that I haven't been this enchanted with a secondary world fantasy in longer than I can remember. When we look back on this decade, sometime in the future, I don't doubt *The Kingdoms of Thorn and Bone* will be considered one of the very best our field had to offer in the 2000s.

Book of Shadows, by Mark Chadbourn & Bo Hampton, Image Comics, 2006, $3.50 each.

And while we're talking about series, Mark Chadbourn has found an interesting way to extend one of his. *Book of Shadows* is a two-issue miniseries that serves as a prequel to his much longer prose series *The Age of Misrule* (from Orion Books in the U.K.).

Annie Lovelock works in a book shop and is just letting the days go by as she tries unsuccessfully to cope with the death of her boyfriend. To help deal with her grief, she has begun to dabble in magic.

When the story opens, she performs a ritual, asking for some sort of sign that there's more to life than dead boyfriends and grief. What she gets is a visit from the Morrigan, and that visit sparks an opening between our world and fairy. And it's the signal that the age of reason has ended, allowing the beings of myths to walk the world once more.

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Like Keyes, Chadbourn understands the mystery and power of magic — what a powerful force it can be when it plays to awe, rather than letting it simply be horrific, or a thinly veiled analogy for powerful weapons. Though, I should add, it can also encompass both and still be satisfying — so long as the wonder of its Mystery isn't forgotten.

Chadbourn also knows that it's the individual characters that make a big story work, and this is a big story, even though it's only the length of a couple of comic books. Lovelock offers a fascinating viewpoint into the proceedings: somewhat nihilistic, until push comes to shove, and she has to make the decision whether she wants to live.

I like Chadbourn's storytelling. And I like his dialogue, and how it does what it's supposed to do: bring the characters to life.

Bo Hampton's art is interesting here. I usually think of him as painting an illustrated story, but in this series the linework is definitely prominent, and the colors appear to be applied with a computer, rather than a brush. But it all works, creating what looks like a curious mash-up of woodblock, lithograph, and comic book art.

You don't need to have read the prose books to be able to appreciate this miniseries. In fact, while it stands wonderfully on its own, one can almost see it as an extended advertisement for the prose series. It has certainly worked that way for me, since as soon as I finish writing this, I'm logging on to an online British bookseller to order myself a copy of *World's End*, the first of the three volumes available so far.

Surrogates, by Robert Venditti & Brett Weldele, Top Shelf Productions, 2006, $19.95.

Last year around this time I reviewed the first three issues of this comic book miniseries. Now all five issues have been reprinted in trade paperback form. I also mentioned at that time that this trade edition was probably going to become available once the series had run its course, so there's no real reason for me to mention it again except that, since I've now had the chance to read the whole series, it would be gravely remiss of me not to bring it to your attention once more.

Yes, it's a comic book, but the story is pure sf, and better sf than much of what's appearing in prose form these days. It's the kind of thing I imagine Philip K. Dick would have written, if he had written comic book scripts. As it is, *Surrogates* carries Dick's spirit forward

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into a new medium. It's an absolutely fascinating piece of work — heartfelt and thoughtful.

Support these guys because we need more sf this good, no matter the medium.

Mercy, Unbound, by Kim Antieau, Simon Pulse, 2006, $6.99.

Kim Antieau has a light prose style, quite humorous at times, though it's far from slapstick. That might make it seem like an odd choice for her to tackle such a serious issue as anorexia, but it really does work.

First, let me assure you that she doesn't play the issue for laughs. The humor simply comes from the askew observations and dialogue of the characters.

This is the story of Mercy O'Connor who thinks she's becoming an angel, so she's stopped eating, because angels don't need to eat. She doesn't have delusions of grandeur. It's more that she sees the world as a terrible place in need of succor and comfort, and feels that for some reason she's been chosen to help out. She doesn't know how much she can do, but she plans to give it her best.

Naturally, her parents are upset about this — especially her mother, with a history in her family of Nazi concentration camps where many of her family starved to death. They can't see the wings Mercy feels itching in her shoulder blades, so they send her to an eating disorder clinic in New Mexico.

Mercy's scared and a little confused at the clinic. The girls here really are sick. And since no one can see her wings, and they aren't growing, she starts to have doubts. What if she's not an angel? What if she's just an ordinary girl who's killing herself?

Antieau finds wise, affirmative answers to all of this in her story, letting it unfold in a realistic manner that nevertheless carries a whisper of magical realism.

An earlier novel by Antieau — *Coyote Cowgirl* — is one of my all-time favorite novels, but this new book certainly comes close. I think what I like best about it is how comfortably — and ably — Antieau reflects life in its pages. The hopes and fears, humor and sorrows. Weighty issues approached with a light touch, lighter ones — in the hands of her characters — taking on a certain gravitas.

This is how it is, and I'm enchanted with Antieau's gift to show it to us in such a way that we see it all anew.

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Waking, by Alyxandra Harvey-Fitzhenry, Orca Book Publishers, 2006, $8.96.

I've mentioned before in this column how I choose the books to review for it: I simply try everything that comes in. If a book holds my interest, I'll read it until it doesn't anymore, or I've come to the end.

That makes for some nice surprises as I try books by authors unfamiliar to me.

Case in point, Alyxandra Harvey-Fitzhenry. I didn't know the name, and the cover of *Waking* — very simple, lots of white with a band of red on which lies a red rose dripping one drop of blood — could have been about anything. I thought it was going to be a vampire novel, but instead, Harvey-Fitzhenry is riffing on "Sleeping Beauty" in a contemporary setting.

Beauty is the name of the main character. She's been having a hard time of it lately with her mother having committed suicide by cutting her wrists and her father now not allowing any sharp object in the house. Beauty's not allowed to use knives, scissors, pins. Her meals are served to her by her father in bite-size portions.

School's not much better. It's hard enough having to get by with a given name such as hers, but now everyone is watching her with a morbid curiosity because of what her mother did.

Beauty's solution is to withdraw into herself. She paints in secret in a corner of the basement and goes through her school days with her head bent down and as low a profile as possible.

And then everything changes with Luna, the new girl in school.

Luna lives with her mother in a kind of Pre-Raphaelite commune in an old house in town. Through a chance encounter at school, Luna befriends Beauty and gently but firmly pulls her out of her shell, with possibly disastrous results.

I liked this book. The characters are engaging and Harvey-Fitzhenry has a deft hand with her prose, slipping effortlessly between the third person perspective of the real world to Beauty's first person narrative in a series of unsettling dreams she has where she's haunted by a mysterious woman in black.

There's no indication on the book that it's being marketed to a YA audience and that's just as well. This is a well-told, magical story that will appeal to anyone who doesn't need some horrible monster, or things blowing up, to enjoy a good book.

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A Dirty Job, by Christopher Moore, William Morrow, 2006, $24.95.

I realized, as I started to write this review, that I can say many of the same things about Moore's writing that I did in my recent review of Neil Gaiman's *Anansi Boys*. The main appeal of authors such as this is their voice, and how enthusiastic you feel about their work is entirely dependent on your reaction to that voice.

While Gaiman's voice is that of a kindly Brit uncle (albeit with a bit of nasty imagination, and a quirky streak in his personality), Moore is more North American and matter-of-fact. But there's that same underlying smile in his voice — the smile that tells us that, like Gaiman, Moore likes his characters and us, and he's letting us in on the jokes he sees.

I like Gaiman's voice better, but Moore is the better plotter. Gaiman's plots amble, and while they eventually get to where they need to go, one has the sense that a lot of it's made up along the way. Moore's plots are sturdier. Here you get the sense that everything plays a part in the forward momentum.

I could be wrong, of course. Gaiman could plot out every detail, while Moore writes on the fly. I suppose the point I'm trying to make is that for all the quirky elements in his story, Moore is still the more straightforward storyteller.

In *A Dirty Job*, newly widowed Charlie Asher discovers that he's been unwittingly recruited to be...well, not exactly Death. More like an aspect of Death, the way department store Santas aren't really Santa Claus, but they do his work for him on a small scale.

Asher is the last person for a job such as this. Slightly neurotic and a bit of a bumbler in the first place, he's trying to raise his newborn daughter and keep his secondhand thrift shop going at the moment this all comes to him, while dealing with the awful grief of losing the love of his life. The last thing he needs is the job of collecting the souls of the deceased, and then passing them on to the next person who should have them.

He also doesn't need to be attacked by giant ravens that live in the sewers, or have a pair of pony-sized black dogs show up to protect his daughter. Or one employee envious of his new career (the Goth), while the other suspects him of being a serial killer (the ex-cop). And what happens if he doesn't fulfill his new duties?

This is a funny book. I mean, genuinely funny. And like the best of such books, the humor grows out

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of the characters and situations they find themselves in. But it also has a lot of heart — and that heart is what will bring us back to the book, once the chuckling has died down.

I can't end this review without quoting from Tim Sandlin's blurb on the back cover: "I would recommend *A Dirty Job* to anyone who is ever likely to die."

Castle Waiting, by Linda Medley, Fantagraphics Books, 2006, $29.95.

Fantagraphics Books have outdone themselves with the production of this complete collection of all of Linda Medley's *Castle Waiting* stories. (Though, for accuracy's sake, it's all one story — a real novel, though it's told in graphic form and first appeared as a serial comic.) But perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised. This is the same publishing company that has been lovingly bringing into print everything from the classic *Peanuts* and *Krazy Kat* strips to the very contemporary work by Los Bros. Hernandez (which appears under the collective title of *Love & Rockets*) in sturdy hardcovers with actual sewn bindings and thick paper stock to highlight the art.

Castle Waiting looks and feels like a fat fairy tale book you might find on the same shelf as your Andrew Lang colored fairy tale books and Arthur Rackham illustrated editions. And funny enough, both are obvious inspirations for Medley's work.

Like Harvey-Fitzhenry's *Waking*, *Castle Waiting* is a riff on "Sleeping Beauty," but it's set firmly in a never-never medieval world, and while it starts off with the elements of that classic fairy tale, what it's really about is the after. In *Castle Waiting*, the princess is woken from her hundred years slumber by the prince, but then they immediately ride off into their new life, leaving behind all the people who keep a castle running.

The years go by and the castle becomes a refuge for those with no other place to go. So — overseen by Sleeping Beauty's original ladies in waiting, Patience, Prudence, and Plenty — we meet the stork-man Mr. Rackham, the bearded nun Sister Peace, the horse-headed knight Sir Chess, a Simple Simon, and Jain, a pregnant woman on the run from her abusive husband. They live their lives, and like the travelers in *The Canterbury Tales*, tell their stories to one another.

Now the thing that makes or breaks a story with any hope of merit is the characters, and what best illuminates characters is their

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dialogue and actions. Medley's dialogue is wonderful, and the anachronisms she throws in add to the flavor, rather than jar. Her art is somewhere between the fine art of children's book illustrators around the turn of the twentieth century and the Sunday comics of the middle part of the century: lots of clean lines, expressive features, and lovely detailed backgrounds.

You will find all sorts of references to old fairy tales in these pages — many of them very subtle — but more importantly, you'll find one of the freshest and most heartwarming reinventions of those old stories, of the *spirit* of those stories here. This is a book that should appeal to everyone and I can't recommend it highly enough.

And if you don't believe me, Jane Yolen makes an excellent case in her introduction as to why you should be reading this book. Go to the book store, flip through the book and look at the art, read Yolen's intro, and I know you'll be as won over as I was when these stories were appearing few and far apart as a serial comic book.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

ELIZABETH HAND

James Tiptree, Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon, by Julie Phillips, St. Martin's Press, 2006, $27.95.

Go Ask Alice

THIS IS THE saddest story I have ever heard, and one of the most frustrating — not in its telling, which is superb, but in its depiction of a woman tragically born a half-century too soon. Alice Sheldon was brilliant, accomplished, beautiful, affluent. Her 1920s childhood experiences in the African wilderness were the stuff of fever dreams; as a teen debutante in Chicago, she could have been played by Katharine Hepburn, though one thinks Frances Farmer might have brought more to the role. Sheldon's subsequent careers — as a WAC, as a member of CIA photointelligence, as a psychologist — were overshadowed by her mother's long and successful stint as a writer, as well as by bouts of mental illness and Alice's profound unease with her own sexual identity. For fifty years this volatile psychic amalgam simmered, with a few added ingredients tossed in — a violent early marriage; long-term amphetamine dependence; a bipolar mood disorder; binge drinking, unhappy love affairs with men, faltering attempts to become a serious painter and writer, even a turn as a chicken farmer in rural New Jersey — until, in 1967, Alice Sheldon finally achieved the creative alchemy she'd been striving for, and the writer James Tiptree Jr. was born.

One often reads of biographies that their subjects could be fictional characters. It's safe to say that the hero/ine of Julia Phillips's definitive *James Tiptree Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon* would defy even the most extravagant novelistic imagination. Artist, CIA operative, gender-bending literary seductress with a Hemingwayesque alter-ego,

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Sheldon insured there'd be no Hollywood ending when, in a suicide pact, she murdered her elderly husband, then shot herself in their suburban home. As Dave Barry says, I am not making this up: Who would fall for it?

But a lot of people *did* fall for Sheldon's literary persona, most famously Robert Silverberg, who wrote in his 1975 introduction to Tiptree's collection *Warm Worlds and Otherwise*,

> "It has been suggested that Tiptree is female, a theory that I find absurd, for there is to me something ineluctably masculine about Tiptree's writing. I don't think the novels of Jane Austen could have been written by a man nor the stories of Ernest Hemingway by a woman, and in the same way I believe the author of the James Tiptree stories is male."

Well, few things are ineluctably masculine in our post-*Brokeback Mountain* age, and Silverberg certainly has nothing to be ashamed of — Tiptree fooled *all* of the writers and editors he corresponded with during the heady years he was writing his best work, from 1967 until November 1976, when Alli (the name Phillips uses to refer to the "real" Alice Sheldon) discovered this letter in Tiptree's P.O. Box.

> "Dear Tip,
>
> Okay, I'm going to lay all my cards on the table. You are *not* required to do likewise.
>
> You've probably heard from people already, but word is spreading very fast that your true name is Alice Sheldon...."

It's a testament to Julia Phillips's powerful narrative that this revelation — which we've been anticipating from Page 1 — can still shock and almost sicken the reader, much as surely it did Alli herself. For someone who had built and dismantled an often shaky professional and sexual identity untold times over the years, before finding success and acceptance among the community of science fiction writers, editors, and fans, this note (from Tiptree's friend and correspondent, Jeff Smith) must have echoed like a tocsin, a warning blare that the ineluctably masculine James Tiptree Jr. was in fact Mrs. Alice Hastings (Mrs. Huntington) Sheldon, a bridge-playing, sixty-something suburban

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matron who lived with her retired husband in McLean, Virginia.

Alice Hastings Bradley was born in 1915. Her father, Herbert Bradley, made his fortune in real estate. Her mother, Mary Hastings Bradley, was in her lifetime a well-known writer, author of books like *The Innocent Adventuress* and *The Wine of Astonishment*; "a socialite, an explorer, and a big game hunter [whose] earnings kept her daughter in mink coats and finishing schools." Alice and her parents lived in an expansive top-floor apartment near Lake Michigan; it included a penthouse and roof garden, as well as a cook, a chauffeur, and a series of governesses.

Alice's mother, Mary, comes across as the sort of writer whose career and ego depended, to some extent, on her family and friends acting as supporting players in the continuing drama of her life. In 1921, Mary took her show on the road: she enlisted herself, Herbert, and six-year-old Alice as safari companions to the naturalist and big game hunter Carl Akeley, whose glass-eyed trophies still gaze at viewers from dioramas in the Field Museum of Chicago and the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan.

Alice's adventures were later recounted by her mother in several cheerful children's travelogues, *Alice in Jungleland*, *Alice in Elephantland*, and *Trailing the Tiger*. Alice's own experience seems more problematic, if not downright traumatic. The group shot and slaughtered an elephant, which was eaten by villagers. The next day their African porters went off to hunt, returning with a prisoner they claimed had attacked them. Despite Akeley's demands that the prisoner be turned over to the white Belgian authorities,

> "that night the Bradleys heard screams, and in the morning the man was gone...one of the 'boys' told them he had been killed and eaten...Alice lay awake and heard the whole thing."

Among other adventures, Alice's mother jokingly offered her blonde daughter in trade for a chief's ivory bracelet, and Alice witnessed a group of Batwa pygmies dancing and wondered, "Am I a Batwa? I'm little." It's almost anticlimactic to add that her mother shot and killed a lion, or that the formaldehyde-soaked remains of a young gorilla speared by one of Akeley's guides were stored beneath Alice's cot.

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Throughout their journey, Alice was always surrounded by such wildly contradictory elements — the otherwordly beauty and strangeness of the African landscape and culture contrasted with the screams of human torment and the stink of dead things.

"It was early impressed on me that I was viable only within the sheltering adult group," the adult Alice wrote; "that the outside was dangerous and beyond my strength ...I never was allowed to learn to combat it; I lived helplessly inside...wondering how I could meet each horrible challenge, and *never getting a chance to practice.*"

This is a long way from the child described by Mary as "dancing along at the head of the line [of porters], holding her Daddy's or Mummy's hand and waving a greeting to the native women in the fields."

The Bradleys returned to Chicago in 1922 but two years later went back to Africa, this time exploring the Ituri rain forest. Nine-year-old Alice, despite her pleas, was forbidden a gun, though she did have an "old-fashioned crinoline" for costume parties. As they traveled into the rain forest, they often found themselves the first white people the villagers had ever encountered, and, as Phillips observes, "experienced what for most science fiction writers is only a story or a metaphor: first contact." Alice entertained villagers by demonstrating how a door opened and closed, and showed them how her doll's blue-glass eyes would do the same. She saw lepers and heard of the ritual mutilation of girls' genitals, which "scared my immature soul sick." Most horrifying of all, she came upon the naked corpses of two men who had been "Stripped, tortured, tied to posts, and left to perish in the sun." There was no place for this event in any of Mary's published travelogues, but she and her husband took photographs, and there was no way their impressionable, sensitive daughter could have forgotten it:

> "You think of a crucifixion as taking place on well-edged beams, straight from the wood polisher. No such thing."

On their return, the Bradleys stopped in Calcutta, where, Alice wrote, "we'd step over dying people with dying babies in their arms...a man on the steps of the Ganges reverently — and quite inadequately — burning his mother's body, and then leaping into the water to fish

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up the still recognizable skull and pry out the gold teeth."

These were the events that shaped Alice Sheldon from early childhood, exposing the rift between the beloved, spoiled daughter of American upper-middle-class privilege and the world she was thrust into, where a child could stumble onto the rotting corpses of men who had been tortured to death, but it was considered inappropriate for a girl to carry a gun, even a toy weapon that might have given her some sense of control over the whirling chaos around her.

The Alice Sheldon who emerges from these pages often demonstrates the disassociativeness found in individuals with multiple personality disorders — "To grow up as a girl is...to be reacted to as nothing or as a thing — and nearly to become that thing" — as well as a grim sense of the worst that humanity can do — "Auschwitz — My Lai — etc. etc. etc. did not *surprise* me one bit, later on." As a teenager at private school she suffered the solitude, sometimes self-imposed, of the extremely gifted, and had migraines severe enough that she would bang her head against the walls of the girl's bathroom, "to try to 'break' whatever was hurting so inside." Later, at boarding school in Switzerland, she would stand too close to the rails as trains barreled past, and made at least one suicide attempt, when she slashed her wrists with a razor. She developed intense crushes on other girls, and had a few same-sex sexual interludes (kissing, fondling); but she was never able to integrate Desire into a romantic relationship with another woman.

"All forms of sex should be explored," she wrote at twenty-four, "and many games should be learned. Relations with other people should be violent and experimental, with the idea of developing a mask to prevent erosion of the personality by other personalities."

The developing of that mask took up much of Alice Sheldon's life. Phillips's biography presents a woman *in extremis*, but one who was very much her mother's daughter when it came to keeping a stiff upper lip, no matter the cost. As an adult (and eerily prefiguring the title of one of her best-known stories, "Love Is the Plan, the Plan Is Death"), Alli told her mother "You 'taught' me, without meaning to, that love is the prelude to appalling pain." A bizarre brush with mother-daughter incest when Alice was fourteen can only have added to her

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sense that lesbianism was something monstrous.

Yet pain must somehow be endured, and for decades Sheldon did so with grace and wit and what can only be described as valor. Nine days after her December 20 debut, at eighteen, she eloped with a boy she'd met at a Christmas Eve dance, a Princeton student and aspiring novelist named William Davey. The marriage lasted six years, and in terms of spectacular dysfunction (drinking, drugging, visiting brothels) seems second only to that of William Burroughs and his common-law wife, Joan Vollmer. As Alli put it, "Anyone who shoots a real gun at you when drunk and angry is simply not husband material, regardless of his taste in literature."

Bill Davey encouraged his beautiful wife to paint, but their sexual relationship was a disaster. She had affairs with men, all apparently unsatisfying. Years later she confided to Joanna Russ, "I am (was) notoriously fucked up about sex." She wrote with austere detachment that "to paint that which one wishes to be seized by, etc, is a sort of contradiction;" yet she also wrote — drunkenly, Phillips suggests — in an otherwise empty sketchbook her need to "ram myself into a crazy soft woman and come, come, spend, come, make her pregnant Jesus to be a man...I love women I will never be happy...."

It's this manic, desperate voice that makes *The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon* so poignant, even as Alli herself soldiered on. She divorced Bill Davey in 1941, moved back in with her parents and got a job as an art critic for the *Chicago Sun*. Despite her continuing attraction toward women, she dated men, and in 1942 enlisted in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (later the Women's Army Corps). In her early days as a WAC in basic training, Alli experienced a near-ecstatic experience of living in a women's utopia —

> "Women seen for the first time at ease, unselfconscious, swaggering or thoughtful, sizing everything up openly, businesslike, all personalities all unbending and unafraid."

Her rapture faded quickly, ending in a bang-out fight with another, stronger, woman (a phys. ed. teacher) whom Alli nearly strangled, an event Alli later recalled as an experience when she "felt fully alive." Early in her biography, Phillips states that Alli was never able to access her rage, and it's tempting to see in this signal occurrence at Fort

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Des Moines the first mad glimmer of James Tiptree himself, wrestling with the demonic Female Other until pulled away by several intervening women officers.

When the war ended, Captain Alice Davey was stationed in London as a Pentagon photointerpreter. There she met Colonel Huntington "Ting" Sheldon, "a tall, graying, gracious senior officer, formerly of Yale and Wall Street." Alli "challenged Colonel Sheldon to a game of chess, played blindfolded, and won. He fell in love."

Alli summed up their sexual relationship thus: "Him and women: Had to get drunk — then of course impotent." Despite (or because of) this, they married, and returned to the U.S. early in 1946. Alli's relentless self-invention continued through the next two decades, as she became a housewife, chicken farmer, CIA analyst, and graduate student at George Washington University in D.C., eventually earning a doctorate in psychology by studying how rats react to novel stimuli and experiences. She also wrote, trying to follow up the success of her story that appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1946, but none of her ambitious projects came to fruition.

And she *read* — science fiction and fantasy, a love since childhood when she first encountered *Weird Tales* magazine and now a necessary escape valve from her observations of rats and her dissertation-writing binges, fueled by speed and alcohol and her own manic energy.

By now, her beloved childhood literature had changed: it was no longer wholly dependent on the bug-eyed monsters and rocket jockeys of pulp's Golden Age. Writers like Kurt Vonnegut, Harlan Ellison, Phillip K. Dick, J. G. Ballard, Thomas M. Disch, Samuel R. Delany, Joanna Russ, Ursula K. Le Guin tackled gender, environmental and social issues that reflected the sweeping changes and excesses of the 1960s. Their prose style, often as overheated as that of their pulp forebears, drew on the burgeoning drug culture. So did the images of psychic and/or sexual disintegration that swirled around the works of Dick , Russ, and Delany in particular. For Alice Sheldon, reading their stories in the pages of *Analog* and *F&SF* and *Galaxy*, it must have seemed like a party she was fated to join.

> "The stories started coming to her when she was writing up her dissertation, studying for her orals, skimping on

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sleep, and using as much Dexedrine as she dared... Sometime in the spring of 1967, Alice Sheldon, a fifty-one-year-old research psychologist, typed them up and sent them out to science fiction magazines...."

The pseudonym she chose was deliberately outrageous: James Tiptree, Jr. The surname was taken from a jar of jam on a supermarket shelf, though critic John Clute suggests the nickname "Tip" derived from Princess Ozma's androgynous counterpart, Tip, in L. Frank Baum's books, which Alice Sheldon had read. The first stories went out not long after she received her doctorate, in February 1967. What happened next is the stuff of literary legend, though in fact Tiptree collected several rejection letters, including one from John W. Campbell, who grumbled "One of the troubles with a majority of modern stories is that nowadays the idea of an heroic Hero is considered gauche or something."

But that fall Campbell bought one story for *Analog*, Harry Harrison took a second for *Fantastic*, and Frederik Pohl accepted a third (which Campbell had already rejected), for *If*. James Tiptree was in like Flynn.

His first sf story, "Birth of a Salesman," appeared in the March 1968 *Analog*. That same year Tiptree sold three more stories, but it was the appearance of "The Last Flight of Dr. Ain" in *Galaxy* a year later that established the tone of Tiptree's best work, the literary equivalent of an ice shard to the heart: chilly, razor-sharp, and terrifying. Tiptree's grim, deliberate account of a doctor unleashing a deadly virus on humankind via air travel — appropriated years later by Terry Gilliam in his film *12 Monkeys* — was only 2,500 words long. Yet her writing here showed the assassin's gifts she was to utilize in her best work: deadly grace and concision and a certain heartlessness, joined to a narrative that never pauses to take a breath. If one were to take a Freudian view of Sheldon's life and work, it's all here in the stories that followed. Sexual repression and self-restraint exploded into a maenad's frenzy of destruction, wreaked upon individuals and urges that control and despoil the world — men, scientists, the blind biological thrust toward sexual union; a clinically ruthless bio-determinism whose ultimate goal was extinction.

The stories, of course, are what really matter about Tiptree, and

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Phillips does a marvelous job of showing how they were born and, later, made their way about the world. Sheldon's greatest work — "Dr. Ain," "The Girl Who Was Plugged In, "The Women Men Don't See," "Love Is the Plan, the Plan Is Death," "The Scientist Who Wouldn't Do Awful Things to Rats," and, especially, "The Screwfly Solution," one of the most frightening stories ever written, penned under Sheldon's *other* nom-du-plume, Raccoona Sheldon — stands among the best short fiction of the late twentieth century, and has never received its due from mainstream critics.

The latter portion of *The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon* reads like an sf version of *Catch Me If You Can*, with Sheldon's masculine alter-ego creating and maintaining a voluminous correspondence, a Real Guy among predominately Real Guy Writers. Phillips quotes generously from these exchanges. The list of correspondents is a roll call of those who were part of the incredible efflorescence that was American science fiction in the 1970s: Ursula Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Damon Knight, Phil Dick, Harlan Ellison, Barry Malzberg, David Gerrold, Ted White, Charles Platt, Vonda McIntrye — you get the idea. Tiptree flirted with Russ and Le Guin, but he showed his manlier face to his male friends, coming off as a bluff guy's guy — but soft enough for a woman.

Too soft, maybe. As curiosity about Tiptree grew in the sf community, gossip spread about the secretive author. Tip was a spy, a spook; he was crazy; he was a woman. This last could still be a liability, as indicated in a letter from Harry Harrison demanding rewrites: "I think 'big shimmery' on page 26 too purple. Or girl-writer term or something." Tiptree's fear of being outed as a girl writer must have been acute. A 1972 letter to Harrison has the undeniable edge of hysteria.

> "WILL YOU LAY OFF?... Harry, listen. You've been a great friend and I value it more than I can say. My life is a mixed-up mess right now. I have personal problems like other people have termites. I'm barely viable. You and my other friends in the sf world, and the writing, are all that's keeping me sane..."

Phillips goes on to say that "Harrison recalled recoiling from

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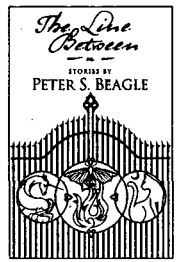
this letter, thinking "This guy's on a twist." Later, after Alli's identity was revealed, he concluded that his friend had not been "nuts" but "a woman who was just being very female about it."

Phillips refrains from commenting on Harrison's observation, but I won't. Why is behavior that would be considered "nuts" for a man considered normal for a female? This is the crux of Alice Sheldon's often tormented life, the disconnect between her projected voice — her stories — and her everyday self. She sometimes seems like a prime candidate for gender-reassignment therapy; at other times, a lesbian so deeply closeted that one's instinct is to drag her into daylight and shout, "See? IT'S NOT SO BAD AFTER ALL."

But it *was* bad, after all. Today, with the Internet, Sheldon's cover would probably be blown in a matter of days or weeks. She certainly appears to have been courting disclosure with her adoption of a second, female, even more transparent pseudonym, the absurd Raccoona Sheldon, who in a dizzying coup-des-lettres carried on her *own* correspondence with various sf figures. As it was, Jeff Smith's letter to P.O. Box 315 arrived on November 23, 1976, and James Tiptree Jr.'s identity unraveled over the following months. So, tragically, did his writing career. Alice Sheldon continued to publish after the revelation that he was a she, but her best work was done. Gardner Dozois threw down the gauntlet by asking, "'Where in your fiction are the equally convincing portraits of what it's like to be a girl growing up?...It wouldn't surprise me at all to find that 'Tiptree's' best work is yet to come." Sheldon responded,

> "Alli Sheldon is maybe a mad woman, maybe an ex-good-researcher, but is not a science



THE LINE BETWEEN:
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PETER S. BEAGLE

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fiction or any other kind of writer. I am nothing."

Two years later, in 1978, she threw all her new work — notes, novel, stories — in the woodstove, and told Ursula Le Guin, "I am trying to become nothing."

Sheldon's great tragedy was that she could not seize her power to write as herself. The masks that she spent a lifetime creating could not, in the end, hide what she really was and what she loved. When, post-Tiptree, Joanna Russ penned a love letter to Alli, Sheldon replied, "Oh, had 65 years been different! I *like* some men a lot, but from the start, before I knew anything, it was always girls and women who lit me up."

Alli and Joanna Russ never met. This was not merely a failure of nerve on Sheldon's part. It was a failure of self. All her life she wrote of being atrracted to aliens, the other (she developed a passionate crush on Leonard Nimoy's Spock); but the truth was that the alien was unquestionably not *other*, but her own kind. Faced with the image of desire in the mirror, she felt compelled to shatter it. All of Phillips's reasoned discussion of Tiptree's work, all her psychological acuity in tracing Alice Sheldon's complicated inner life — none of it quite prepares you for Alice Sheldon's statement that "My 'illness' has taken the form of writing some more science-fiction stories...I am going to finish the series with one about a man who kills EVERYBODY, that will make me feel better."

Nor does it prepare a reader for what she will feel the first time she encounters "The Screwfly Solution" or "The Last Voyage of Dr. Ain" or "The Women Men Don't See" — the same emotion, perhaps, that gripped that physical education teacher in Fort Des Moines, or Alice Sheldon's husband when he realized, as Phillips suggests, that his wife was going to kill him: pure fear. In the end, Alice Sheldon really was the woman nobody saw.

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"The Last Unicorn proceeded to run 220 volts through my little 110 volt brain," writes Kathleen Bartholomew in her introduction to the Peter S. Beagle issue of www.greenmanreview.com. *Such responses to Mr. Beagle's work are common, and that 220-volt line runs strong. Mr. Beagle's recent work includes a story collection,* The Line Between *and a forthcoming novel entitled* Summerlong. *"El Regalo" first appeared in* The Line Between. *It's a fine work of fantasy for Young Adult readers of all ages.*

El Regalo

By Peter S. Beagle

"YOU CAN'T KILL HIM," MR. Luke said. "Your mother wouldn't like it." After some consideration, he added, "I'd be rather annoyed myself."

"But wait," Angie said, in the dramatic tones of a television commercial for some miraculous mop. "There's more. I didn't tell you about the brandied cupcakes — "

"Yes, you did."

"And about him telling Jennifer Williams what I got her for her birthday, and she pitched a fit, because she had two of them already — "

"He meant well," her father said cautiously. "I'm pretty sure."

"And then when he finked to Mom about me and Orlando Cruz, and we weren't doing *anything* — "

"Nevertheless. No killing."

Angie brushed sweaty mouse-brown hair off her forehead and regrouped. "Can I at least maim him a little? Trust me, he's earned it."

"I don't doubt you," Mr. Luke agreed. "But you're twelve, and Marvyn's eight. Eight and a half. You're bigger than he is, so beating him

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up isn't fair. When you're...oh, say, twenty, and he's sixteen and a half — okay, you can try it then. Not until."

Angie's wordless grunt might or might not have been assent. She started out of the room, but her father called her back, holding out his right hand. "Pinky-swear, kid." Angie eyed him warily, but hooked her little finger around his without hesitation, which was a mistake. "You did that much too easily," her father said, frowning. "Swear by Buffy."

"What? You can't swear by a television show!"

"Where is that written? Repeat after me — 'I swear by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* — '"

"You really *don't* trust me!"

"'I swear by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* that I will keep my hands off my baby brother — '"

"My baby brother, the monster! He's gotten worse since he started sticking that 'y' in his name — "

"' — and I will stop calling him Ex-Lax — '"

"Come on, I only do that when he makes me really mad — "

"' — until he shall have attained the age of sixteen years and six months, after which time — '"

"After which time I get to pound him into marmalade. Deal. I can wait." She grinned; then turned self-conscious, making a performance of pulling down her upper lip to cover the shiny new braces. At the door, she looked over her shoulder and said lightly, "You are way too smart to be a father."

From behind his book, Mr. Luke answered, "I've often thought so myself."

Angie spent the rest of the evening in her room, doing homework on the phone with Melissa Feldman, her best friend. Finished, feeling virtuously entitled to some low-fat chocolate reward, she wandered down the hall toward the kitchen, passing her brother's room on the way. Looking in — not because of any special interest, but because Marvyn invariably hung around her own doorway, gazing in aimless fascination at whatever she was doing, until shooed away — she saw him on the floor, playing with Milady, the gray, ancient family cat. Nothing unusual about that: Marvyn and Milady had been an item since he was old enough to realize that the cat wasn't something to eat. What halted Angie as though she had walked

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into a wall was that they were playing Monopoly, and that Milady appeared to be winning.

Angie leaned in the doorway, entranced and alarmed at the same time. Marvyn had to throw the dice for both Milady and himself, and the old cat was too riddled with arthritis to handle the pastel Monopoly money easily. But she waited her turn, and moved her piece — she had the silver top hat — very carefully, as though considering possible options. And she already had a hotel on Park Place.

Marvyn jumped up and slammed the door as soon as he noticed his sister watching the game, and Angie went on to liberate a larger-than-planned remnant of sorbet. Somewhere near the bottom of the container she finally managed to stuff what she'd just glimpsed deep in the part of her mind she called her "forgettery." As she'd once said to her friend Melissa, "There's such a thing as too much information, and it is not going to get me. I am never going to know more than I want to know about stuff. Look at the President."

For the next week or so Marvyn made a point of staying out of Angie's way, which was all by itself enough to put her mildly on edge. If she knew one thing about her brother, it was that the time to worry was when you didn't see him. All the same, on the surface things were peaceful enough, and continued so until the evening when Marvyn went dancing with the garbage.

The next day being pickup day, Mrs. Luke had handed him two big green plastic bags of trash for the rolling bins down the driveway. Marvyn had made enough of a fuss about the task that Angie stayed by the open front window to make sure that he didn't simply drop the bags in the grass, and vanish into one of his mysterious hideouts. Mrs. Luke was back in the living room with the news on, but Angie was still at the window when Marvyn looked around quickly, mumbled a few words she couldn't catch, and then did a thing with his left hand, so fast she saw no more than a blurry twitch. And the two garbage bags went dancing.

Angie's buckling knees dropped her to the couch under the window, though she never noticed it. Marvyn let go of the bags altogether, and they rocked alongside him — backwards, forwards, sideways, in perfect timing, with perfect steps, turning with him as though he were the star and they his backup singers. To Angie's astonishment, he was snapping his fingers

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and moonwalking, as she had never imagined he could do — and the bags were pushing out green arms and legs as the three of them danced down the driveway. When they reached the cans, Marvyn's partners promptly went limp and were nothing but plastic garbage bags again. Marvyn plopped them in, dusted his hands, and turned to walk back to the house.

When he saw Angie watching, neither of them spoke. Angie beckoned. They met at the door and stared at each other. Angie said only, "My room."

Marvyn dragged in behind her, looking everywhere and nowhere at once, and definitely not at his sister. Angie sat down on the bed and studied him: chubby and messy-looking, with an unmanageable sprawl of rusty-brown hair and an eyepatch meant to tame a wandering left eye. She said, "Talk to me."

"About what?" Marvyn had a deep, foggy voice for eight and a half — Mr. Luke always insisted that it had changed before Marvyn was born. "I didn't break your CD case."

"Yes, you did," Angie said. "But forget that. Let's talk about garbage bags. Let's talk about Monopoly."

Marvyn was utterly businesslike about lies: in a crisis he always told the truth, until he thought of something better. He said, "I'm warning you right now, you won't believe me."

"I never do. Make it a good one."

"Okay," Marvyn said. "I'm a witch."

When Angie could speak, she said the first thing that came into her head, which embarrassed her forever after. "You can't be a witch. You're a wizard, or a warlock or something." Like we're having a sane conversation, she thought.

Marvyn shook his head so hard that his eyepatch almost came loose. "Uh-uh! That's all books and movies and stuff. You're a man witch or you're a woman witch, that's it. I'm a man witch."

"You'll be a dead witch if you don't quit shitting me," Angie told him. But her brother knew he had her, and he grinned like a pirate (at home he often tied a bandanna around his head, and he was constantly after Mrs. Luke to buy him a parrot). He said, "You can ask Lidia. She was the one who knew."

Lidia del Carmen de Madero y Gomez had been the Lukes' housekeeper

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since well before Angie's birth. She was from Ciego de Ávila in Cuba, and claimed to have changed Fidel Castro's diapers as a girl working for his family. For all her years — no one seemed to know her age; certainly not the Lukes — Lidia's eyes remained as clear as a child's, and Angie had on occasion nearly wept with envy of her beautiful wrinkled deep-dark skin. For her part, Lidia got on well with Angie, spoke Spanish with her mother, and was teaching Mr. Luke to cook Cuban food. But Marvyn had been hers since his infancy, beyond question or interference. They went to Spanish-language movies on Saturdays, and shopped together in the Bowen Street *barrio*.

"The one who knew," Angie said. "Knew what? Is Lidia a witch too?"

Marvyn's look suggested that he was wondering where their parents had actually found their daughter. "No, of course she's not a witch. She's a *santera*."

Angie stared. She knew as much about *Santeria* as anyone growing up in a big city with a growing population of Africans and South Americans — which wasn't much. Newspaper articles and television specials had informed her that *santeros* sacrificed chickens and goats and did...things with the blood. She tried to imagine Marvyn with a chicken, doing things, and couldn't. Not even Marvyn.

"So Lidia got you into it?" she finally asked. "Now you're a *santero* too?"

"Nah, I'm a witch, I told you." Marvyn's disgusted impatience was approaching critical mass.

Angie said, "Wicca? You're into the Goddess thing? There's a girl in my home room, Devlin Margulies, and she's a Wiccan, and that's all she talks about. Sabbats and esbats, and drawing down the moon, and the rest of it. She's got skin like a cheese-grater."

Marvyn blinked at her. "What's a Wiccan?" He sprawled suddenly on her bed, grabbing Milady as she hobbled in and pooting loudly on her furry stomach. "I already knew I could sort of mess with things — you remember the rubber duck, and that time at the baseball game?" Angie remembered. Especially the rubber duck. "Anyway, Lidia took me to meet this real old lady, in the farmers' market, she's even older than her, her name's Yemaya, something like that, she smokes this funny little pipe all the time. Anyway, she took hold of me, my face, and she looked in my

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eyes, and then she closed her eyes, and she just sat like that for so long!" He giggled. "I thought she'd fallen asleep, and I started to pull away, but Lidia wouldn't let me. So she sat like that, and she sat, and then she opened her eyes and she told me I was a witch, a *brujo*. And Lidia bought me a two-scoop ice-cream cone. Coffee and chocolate, with M&Ms."

"You won't have a tooth in your head by the time you're fifteen." Angie didn't know what to say, what questions to ask. "So that's it? The old lady, she gives you witch lessons or something?"

"Nah — I told you, she's a big *santera*, that's different. I only saw her that one time. She kept telling Lidia that I had *el regalo* — I think that means the gift, she said that a lot — and I should keep practicing. Like you with the clarinet."

Angie winced. Her hands were small and stubby-fingered, and music slipped through them like rain. Her parents, sympathizing, had offered to cancel the clarinet lessons, but Angie refused. As she confessed to her friend Melissa, she had no skill at accepting defeat.

Now she asked, "So how do you practice? Boogying with garbage bags?"

Marvyn shook his head. "That's getting old — so's playing board games with Milady. I was thinking maybe I could make the dishes wash themselves, like in *Beauty and the Beast*. I bet I could do that."

"You could enchant my homework," Angie suggested. "My algebra, for starters."

Her brother snorted. "Hey, I'm just a kid, I've got my limits! I mean, your homework?"

"Right," Angie said. "Right. Look, what about laying a major spell on Tim Hubley, the next time he's over here with Melissa? Like making his feet go flat so he can't play basketball — that's the only reason she likes him, anyway. Or — " her voice became slower and more hesitant — "what about getting Jake Petrakis to fall madly, wildly, totally in love with me? That'd be...funny."

Marvyn was occupied with Milady. "Girl stuff, who cares about all that? I want to be so good at soccer everybody'll want to be on my team — I want fat Josh Wilson to have patches over both eyes, so he'll leave me alone. I want Mom to order thin-crust pepperoni pizza every night, and I want Dad to — "

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"No spells on Mom and Dad, not ever!" Angie was on her feet, leaning menacingly over him. "You got that, Ex-Lax? You mess with them even once, believe me, you'd better be one hella witch to keep me from strangling you. Understood?"

Marvyn nodded. Angie said, "Okay, I tell you what. How about practicing on Aunt Caroline when she comes next weekend?"

Marvyn's pudgy pirate face lit up at the suggestion. Aunt Caroline was their mother's older sister, celebrated in the Luke family for knowing everything about everything. A pleasant, perfectly decent person, her perpetual air of placid expertise would have turned a saint into a serial killer. Name a country, and Aunt Caroline had spent enough time there to know more about the place than a native; bring up a newspaper story, and without fail Aunt Caroline could tell you something about it that hadn't been in the paper; catch a cold, and Aunt Caroline could recite the maiden name of the top medical researcher in rhinoviruses' mother. (Mr. Luke said often that Aunt Caroline's motto was, "Say something, and I'll bet you're wrong.")

"Nothing dangerous," Angie commanded, "nothing scary. And nothing embarrassing or anything."

Marvyn looked sulky. "It's not going to be any fun that way."

"If it's too gross, they'll know you did it," his sister pointed out. "I would." Marvyn, who loved secrets and hidden identities, yielded.

During the week before Aunt Caroline's arrival, Marvyn kept so quietly to himself that Mrs. Luke worried about his health. Angie kept as close an eye on him as possible, but couldn't be at all sure what he might be planning — no more than he, she suspected. Once she caught him changing the TV channels without the remote; and once, left alone in the kitchen to peel potatoes and carrots for a stew, he had the peeler do it while he read the Sunday funnies. The apparent smallness of his ambitions relieved Angie's vague unease, lulling her into complacency about the big family dinner that was traditional on the first night of a visit from Aunt Caroline.

Aunt Caroline was, among other things, the sort of woman incapable of going anywhere without attempting to buy it. Her own house was jammed to the attic with sightseer souvenirs from all over the world: children's toys from Slovenia, sculptures from Afghanistan, napkin rings

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from Kenya shaped like lions and giraffes, legions of brass bangles, boxes and statues of gods from India, and so many Russian *matryoshka* dolls fitting inside each other that she gave them away as stocking-stuffers every Christmas. She never came to the table at the Lukes without bringing some new acquisition for approval; so dinner with Aunt Caroline, in Mr. Luke's words, was always Show and Tell time.

Her most recent hegira had brought her back to West Africa for the third or fourth time, and provided her with the most evil-looking doll Angie had ever seen. Standing beside Aunt Caroline's plate, it was about two feet high, with bat ears, too many fingers, and eyes like bright green marbles streaked with scarlet threads. Aunt Caroline explained rapturously that it was a fertility doll unique to a single Benin tribe, which Angie found impossible to credit. "No way!" she announced loudly. "Not for one minute am I even thinking about having babies with that thing staring at me! It doesn't even look pregnant, the way they do. No way in the world!"

Aunt Caroline had already had two of Mr. Luke's margaritas, and was working on a third. She replied with some heat that not all fertility figures came equipped with cannonball breasts, globular bellies and callipygous rumps — "Some of them are remarkably slender, even by Western standards!" Aunt Caroline herself, by anyone's standards, was built along the general lines of a chopstick.

Angie was drawing breath for a response when she heard her father say behind her, "Well, Jesus Harrison Christ," and then her mother's soft gasp, "Caroline." But Aunt Caroline was busy explaining to her niece that she knew absolutely nothing about fertility. Mrs. Luke said, considerably louder, "Caroline, shut up, your doll!"

Aunt Caroline said, "What, what?" and then turned, along with Angie. They both screamed.

The doll was growing all the things Aunt Caroline had been insisting it didn't need to qualify as a fertility figure. It was carved from ebony, or from something even harder, but it was pushing out breasts and belly and hips much as Marvyn's two garbage bags had suddenly developed arms and legs. Even its expression had changed, from hungry slyness to a downright silly grin, as though it were about to kiss someone, anyone. It took a few shaky steps forward on the table and put its foot in the salsa.

Then the babies started coming.

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They came pattering down on the dinner table, fast and hard, like wooden rain, one after another, after another, after another...perfect little copies, miniatures, of the madly smiling doll-thing, plopping out of it — *just like Milady used to drop kittens in my lap,* Angie thought absurdly. One of them fell into her plate, and one bounced into the soup, and a couple rolled into Mr. Luke's lap, making him knock his chair over trying to get out of the way. Mrs. Luke was trying to grab them all up at once, which wasn't possible, and Aunt Caroline sat where she was and shrieked. And the doll kept grinning and having babies.

Marvyn was standing against the wall, looking both as terrified as Aunt Caroline and as stupidly pleased as the doll-thing. Angie caught his eye and made a fierce signal, *enough, quit, turn it off,* but either her brother was having too good a time, or else had no idea how to undo whatever spell he had raised. One of the miniatures hit her in the head, and she had a vision of her whole family being drowned in wooden doll-babies, everyone gurgling and reaching up pathetically toward the surface before they all went under for the third time. Another baby caromed off the soup tureen into her left ear, one sharp ebony fingertip drawing blood.

It stopped, finally — Angie never learned how Marvyn regained control — and things almost quieted down, except for Aunt Caroline. The fertility doll got the look of glazed joy off its face and went back to being a skinny, ugly, duty-free airport souvenir, while the doll-babies seemed to melt away exactly as though they had been made of ice instead of wood. Angie was quick enough to see one of them actually dissolving into nothingness directly in front of Aunt Caroline, who at this point stopped screaming and began hiccoughing and beating the table with her palms. Mr. Luke pounded her on the back, and Angie volunteered to practice her Heimlich maneuver, but was overruled. Aunt Caroline went to bed early.

Later, in Marvyn's room, he kept his own bed between himself and Angie, indignantly demanding, "What? You said not scary — what's scary about a doll having babies? I thought it was cute."

"Cute," Angie said. "Uh-huh." She was wondering, in a distant sort of way, how much prison time she might get if she actually murdered her brother. *Ten years? Five, with good behavior and a lot of psychiatrists? I could manage it.* "And what did I tell you about not embarrassing Aunt Caroline?"

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"How did I embarrass her?" Marvyn's visible eye was wide with outraged innocence. "She shouldn't drink so much, that's her problem. She embarrassed me."

"They're going to figure it out, you know," Angie warned him. "Maybe not Aunt Caroline, but Mom for sure. She's a witch herself that way. Your cover is blown, buddy."

But to her own astonishment, not a word was ever said about the episode, the next day or any other — not by her observant mother, not by her dryly perceptive father, nor even by Aunt Caroline, who might reasonably have been expected at least to comment at breakfast. A baffled Angie remarked to Milady, drowsing on her pillow, "I guess if a thing's weird enough, somehow nobody saw it." This explanation didn't satisfy her, not by a long shot, but lacking anything better she was stuck with it. The old cat blinked in squeezy-eyed agreement, wriggled herself into a more comfortable position, and fell asleep still purring.

Angie kept Marvyn more closely under her eye after that than she had done since he was quite small, and first showing a penchant for playing in traffic. Whether this observation was the cause or not, he did remain more or less on his best behavior, barring the time he turned the air in the bicycle tires of a boy who had stolen his superhero comic book to cement. There was also the affair of the enchanted soccer ball, which kept rolling back to him as though it couldn't bear to be with anyone else. And Angie learned to be extremely careful when making herself a sandwich, because if she lost track of her brother for too long, the sandwich was liable to acquire an extra ingredient. Paprika was one, tabasco another, and Scotch Bonnet peppers were a special favorite. But there were others less hot and even more objectionable. As she snarled to a sympathetic Melissa Feldman, who had two brothers of her own, "They ought to be able to jail kids just for being eight and a half."

Then there was the matter of Marvyn's attitude toward Angie's attitude about Jake Petrakis.

Jake Petrakis was a year ahead of Angie at school. He was half-Greek and half-Irish, and his blue eyes and thick poppy-colored hair contrasted so richly with his olive skin that she had not been able to look directly at him since the fourth grade. He was on the swim team, and he was the president of the Chess Club, and he went with Ashleigh Sutton, queen of

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the junior class, rechristened "Ghastly Ashleigh" by the loyal Melissa. But he spoke kindly and cheerfully to Angie without fail, always saying *Hey, Angie*, and *How's it going, Angie?*, and *See you in the fall, Angie, have a good summer*. She clutched such things to herself, every one of them, and at the same time could not bear them.

Marvyn was as merciless as a mosquito when it came to Jake Petrakis. He made swooning, kissing noises whenever he spied Angie looking at Jake's picture in her yearbook, and drove her wild by holding invented conversations between them, just loudly enough for her to hear. His increasing ability at witchcraft meant that scented, decorated, and misspelled love notes were likely to flutter down onto her bed at any moment, as were long-stemmed roses, imitation jewelry (Marvyn had limited experience and poor taste), and small, smudgy photos of Jake and Ashleigh together. Mr. Luke had to invoke Angie's oath more than once, and to sweeten it with a promise of a new bicycle if Marvyn made it through the year undamaged. Angie held out for a mountain bike, and her father sighed. "That was always a myth, about the gypsies stealing children," he said, rather wistfully. "It was surely the other way around. Deal."

Yet there were intermittent peaceful moments between Marvyn and Angie, several occurring in Marvyn's room. It was a far tidier place than Angie's room, for all the clothes on the floor and battered board game boxes sticking out from under the bed. Marvyn had mounted *National Geographic* foldout maps all around the walls, lining them up so perfectly that the creases were invisible; and on one special wall were prints and photos of a lot of people with strange staring eyes. Angie recognized Rasputin, and knew a few of the other names — Aleister Crowley, for one, and a man in Renaissance dress called Dr. John Dee. There were two women, as well: the young witch Willow, from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and a daguerreotype of a black woman wearing a kind of turban folded into points. No Harry Potter, however. Marvyn had never taken to Harry Potter.

There was also, one day after school, a very young kitten wobbling among the books littering Marvyn's bed. A surprised Angie picked it up and held it over her face, feeling its purring between her hands. It was a dark, dusty gray, rather like Milady — indeed, Angie had never seen another cat of that exact color. She nuzzled its tummy happily, asking it, "Who are you, huh? Who could you ever be?"

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Marvyn was feeding his angelfish and didn't look up. He said, "She's Milady."

Angie dropped the kitten on the bed. Marvyn said, "I mean, she's Milady when she was young. I went back and got her."

When he did turn around, he was grinning the maddening pirate grin Angie could never stand, savoring her shock. It took her a minute to find words, and more time to make them come out. She said, "You went back. You went back in time?"

"It was easy," Marvyn said. "Forward's *hard* — I don't think I could ever get really forward. Maybe Dr. Dee could do it." He picked up the kitten and handed her back to his sister. It was Milady, down to the crooked left ear and the funny short tail with the darker bit on the end. He said, "She was hurting all the time, she was so old. I thought, if she could — you know — start over, before she got the arthritis...."

He didn't finish. Angie said slowly, "So where's Milady? The other one? I mean, if you brought this one...I mean, how can they be in the same world?"

"They can't," Marvyn said. "The old Milady's gone."

Angie's throat closed up. Her eyes filled, and so did her nose, and she had to blow it before she could speak again. Looking at the kitten, she knew it was Milady, and made herself think about how good it would be to have her once again bouncing around the house, no longer limping grotesquely and meowing with the pain. But she had loved the old cat all her life, and never known her as a kitten, and when the new Milady started to climb into her lap, Angie pushed her away.

"All right," she said to Marvyn. "All right. How did you get...back, or whatever?"

Marvyn shrugged and went back to his fish. "No big deal. You just have to concentrate the right way."

Angie bounced a plastic Wiffle ball off the back of his neck, and he turned around, annoyed. "Leave me alone! Okay, you want to know — there's a spell, words you have to say over and over and over, until you're sick of them, and there's herbs in it too. You have to light them, and hang over them, and you shut your eyes and keep breathing them in and saying the words — "

"I knew I'd been smelling something weird in your room lately. I thought you were sneaking takeout curry to bed with you again."

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"And then you open your eyes, and there you are," Marvyn said. "I told you, no big deal."

"There you are where? How do you know where you'll come out? When you'll come out? Click your heels together three times and say there's no place like home?"

"No, dork, you just *know*." And that was all Angie could get out of him — not, as she came to realize, because he wouldn't tell her, but because he couldn't. Witch or no witch, he was still a small boy, with almost no real idea of what he was doing. He was winging it all, playing it all by ear.

Arguing with Marvyn always gave her a headache, and her history homework — the rise of the English merchant class — was starting to look good in comparison. She went back to her own bedroom and read two whole chapters, and when the kitten Milady came stumbling and squeaking in, Angie let her sleep on the desk. "What the heck," she told it, "it's not your fault."

That evening, when Mr. and Mrs. Luke got home, Angie told them that Milady had died peacefully of illness and old age while they were at work, and was now buried in the back garden. (Marvyn had wanted to make it a horrible hit-and-run accident, complete with a black SUV and half-glimpsed license plate starting with the letter Q, but Angie vetoed this.) Marvyn's contribution to her solemn explanation was to explain that he had seen the new kitten in a petshop window, "and she just looked so much like Milady, and I used my whole allowance, and I'll take care of her, I promise!" Their mother, not being a true cat person, accepted the story easily enough, but Angie was never sure about Mr. Luke. She found him too often sitting with the kitten on his lap, the two of them staring solemnly at each other.

But she saw very little evidence of Marvyn fooling any further with time. Nor, for that matter, was he showing the interest she would have expected in turning himself into the world's best second-grade soccer player, ratcheting up his test scores high enough to be in college by the age of eleven, or simply getting even with people (since Marvyn forgot nothing and had a hit list going back to day-care). She could almost always tell when he'd been making his bed by magic, or making the window plants grow too fast, but he seemed content to remain on that level. Angie let it go.

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Once she did catch him crawling on the ceiling, like Spider-Man, but she yelled at him and he fell on the bed and threw up. And there was, of course, the time — two times, actually — when, with Mrs. Luke away, Marvyn organized all the shoes in her closet into a chorus line, and had them tapping and kicking together like the Rockettes. It was fun for Angie to watch, but she made him stop because they were her mother's shoes. What if her clothes joined in? The notion was more than she wanted to deal with.

As it was, there was already plenty to deal with just then. Besides her schoolwork, there was band practice, and Melissa's problems with her boyfriend, not to mention the endless hours spent at the dentist, correcting a slight overbite. Melissa insisted that it made her look sexy, but the suggestion had the wrong effect on Angie's mother. In any case, as far as Angie could see, all Marvyn was doing was playing with a new box of toys, like an elaborate electric train layout, or a top-of-the-line Erector set. She was even able to imagine him getting bored with magic itself after a while. Marvyn had a low threshold for boredom.

Angie was in the orchestra, as well as the band, because of a chronic shortage of woodwinds, but she liked the marching band better. You were out of doors, performing at parades and football games, part of the joyful noise, and it was always more exciting than standing up in a dark, hushed auditorium playing for people you could hardly see. "Besides," as she confided to her mother, "in marching band nobody really notices how you sound. They just want you to keep in step."

On a bright spring afternoon, rehearsing "The Washington Post March" with the full band, Angie's clarinet abruptly went mad. No "licorice stick" now, but a stick of rapturous dynamite, it took off on flights of rowdy improvisation, doing outrageous somersaults, backflips, and cartwheels with the melody — things that Angie knew she could never have conceived of, even if her skill had been equal to the inspiration. Her bandmates, up and down the line, were turning to stare at her, and she wanted urgently to wail, "Hey, I'm not the one, it's my stupid brother, you know I can't play like that." But the music kept spilling out, excessive, absurd, unstoppable — unlike the march, which finally lurched to a disorderly halt. Angie had never been so embarrassed in her life.

Mr. Bishow, the bandmaster, came bumbling through the milling

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musicians to tell her, "Angie, that was fantastic — that was dazzling! I never knew you had such spirit, such freedom, such wit in your music!" He patted her — hugged her even, quickly and cautiously — then stepped back almost immediately and said, "Don't ever do it again."

"Like I'd have a choice," Angie mumbled, but Mr. Bishow was already shepherding the band back into formation for "Semper Fidelis" and "High Society," which Angie fumbled her way through as always, two bars behind the rest of the woodwinds. She was slouching disconsolately off the field when Jake Petrakis, his dark-gold hair still glinting damply from swimming practice, ran over to her to say, "Hey, Angie, cool," then punched her on the shoulder, as he would have done another boy, and dashed off again to meet one of his relay-team partners. And Angie went on home, and waited for Marvyn behind the door of his room.

She seized him by the hair the moment he walked in, and he squalled, "All right, let go, all right! I thought you'd like it!"

"Like it?" Angie shook him, hard. "*Like* it? You evil little ogre, you almost got me kicked out of the band! What else are you lining up for me that you think I'll *like*?"

"Nothing, I swear!" But he was giggling even while she was shaking him. "Okay, I was going to make you so beautiful, even Mom and Dad wouldn't recognize you, but I quit on that. Too much work." Angie grabbed for his hair again, but Marvyn ducked. "So what I thought, maybe I really could get Jake what's-his-face to go crazy about you. There's all kinds of spells and things for that — "

"Don't you dare," Angie said. She repeated the warning calmly and quietly. "Don't. You. Dare."

Marvyn was still giggling. "Nah, I didn't think you'd go for it. Would have been fun, though." Suddenly he was all earnestness, staring up at his sister out of one visible eye, strangely serious, even with his nose running. He said, "It is fun, Angie. It's the most fun I've ever had."

"Yeah, I'll bet," she said grimly. "Just leave me out of it from now on, if you've got any plans for the third grade." She stalked into the kitchen, looking for apple juice.

Marvyn tagged after her, chattering nervously about school, soccer games, the Milady-kitten's rapid growth, and a possible romance in his angelfish tank. "I'm sorry about the band thing, I won't do it again. I just

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thought it'd be nice if you could play really well, just one time. Did you like the music part, anyway?"

Angie did not trust herself to answer him. She was reaching for the apple juice bottle when the top flew off by itself, bouncing straight up at her face. As she flinched back, a glass came skidding down the counter toward her. She grabbed it before it crashed into the refrigerator, then turned and screamed at Marvyn, "Damn it, Ex-Lax, you quit that! You're going to hurt somebody, trying to do every damn thing by magic!"

"You said the D-word twice!" Marvyn shouted back at her. "I'm telling Mom!" But he made no move to leave the kitchen, and after a moment a small, grubby tear came sliding down from under the eyepatch. "I'm not using magic for everything! I just use it for the boring stuff, mostly. Like the garbage, and vacuuming up, and like putting my clothes away. And Milady's litter box, when it's my turn. That kind of stuff, okay?"

Angie studied him, marveling as always at his capacity for looking heartwrenchingly innocent. She said, "No point to it when I'm cleaning her box, right? Never mind — just stay out of my way, I've got a French midterm tomorrow." She poured the apple juice, put it back, snatched a raisin cookie and headed for her room. But she paused in the doorway, for no reason she could ever name, except perhaps the way Marvyn had moved to follow her and then stopped himself. "What? Wipe your nose, it's gross. What's the matter now?"

"Nothing," Marvyn mumbled. He wiped his nose on his sleeve, which didn't help. He said, "Only I get scared, Angie. It's scary, doing the stuff I can do."

"What scary? Scary how? A minute ago it was more fun than you've ever had in your life."

"It is!" He moved closer, strangely hesitant: neither witch, nor pirate nor seraph, but an anxious, burdened small boy. "Only sometimes it's like too much fun. Sometimes, right in the middle, I think maybe I should stop, but I can't. Like one time, I was by myself, and I was just fooling around...and I sort of made this *thing*, which was really interesting, only it came out funny and then I couldn't unmake it for the longest time, and I was scared Mom and Dad would come home — "

Angie, grimly weighing her past French grades in her mind, reached

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back for another raisin cookie. "I told you before, you're going to get yourself into real trouble doing crazy stuff like that. Just quit, before something happens by magic that you can't fix by magic. You want advice, I just gave you advice. See you around."

Marvyn wandered forlornly after her to the door of her room. When she turned to close it, he mumbled, "I wish I were as old as you. So I'd know what to do."

"Ha," Angie said, and shut the door.

Whereupon, heedless of French irregular verbs, she sat down at her desk and began writing a letter to Jake Petrakis.

Neither then nor even much later was Angie ever able to explain to anyone why she had written that letter at precisely that time. Because he had slapped her shoulder and told her she — or at least her music — was cool? Because she had seen him, that same afternoon, totally tangled up with Ghastly Ashleigh in a shadowy corner of the library stacks? Because of Marvyn's relentless teasing? Or simply because she was twelve years old, and it was time for her to write such a letter to someone? Whatever the cause, she wrote what she wrote, and then she folded it up and put it away in her desk drawer.

Then she took it out, and put it back in, and then she finally put it into her backpack. And there the letter stayed for nearly three months, well past midterms, finals, and football, until the fateful Friday night when Angie was out with Melissa, walking and window-shopping in downtown Avicenna, placidly drifting in and out of every coffeeshop along Parnell Street. She told Melissa about the letter then, and Melissa promptly went into a fit of the giggles, which turned into hiccups and required another cappuccino to pacify them. When she could speak coherently, she said, "You ought to send it to him. You've got to send it to him."

Angie was outraged, at first. "No way! I wrote it for me, not for a test or a class, and damn sure not for Jake Petrakis. What kind of a dipshit do you think I am?"

Melissa grinned at her out of mocking green eyes. "The kind of dipshit who's got that letter in your backpack right now, and I bet it's in an envelope with an address and a stamp on it."

"It doesn't have a stamp! And the envelope's just to protect it! I just like having it with me, that's all — "

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"And the address?"

"Just for practice, okay? But I didn't sign it, and there's no return address, so that shows you!"

"Right." Melissa nodded. "Right. That definitely shows me."

"Drop it," Angie told her, and Melissa dropped it then. But it was a Friday night, and both of them were allowed to stay out late, as long as they were together, and Avicenna has a lot of coffeeshops. Enough lattes and cappuccinos, with double shots of espresso, brought them to a state of cheerfully jittery abandon in which everything in the world was supremely, ridiculously funny. Melissa never left the subject of Angie's letter alone for very long — "Come on, what's the worst that could happen? Him reading it and maybe figuring out you wrote it? Listen, the really worst thing would be you being an old, old lady still wishing you'd told Jake Petrakis how you felt when you were young. And now he's married, and he's a grandfather, and probably dead, for all you know — "

"Quit it!" But Angie was giggling almost as much as Melissa now, and somehow they were walking down quiet Lovisi Street, past the gas station and the boarded-up health-food store, to find the darkened Petrakis house and tiptoe up the steps to the porch. Facing the front door, Angie dithered for a moment, but Melissa said, "An old lady, in a home, for God's sake, and he'll never know," and Angie took a quick breath and pushed the letter under the door. They ran all the way back to Parnell Street, laughing so wildly that they could barely breathe...

...and Angie woke up in the morning whispering *omigod, omigod, omigod*, over and over, even before she was fully awake. She lay in bed for a good hour, praying silently and desperately that the night before had been some crazy, awful dream, and that when she dug into her backpack the letter would still be there. But she knew dreadfully better, and she never bothered to look for it on her frantic way to the telephone. Melissa said soothingly, "Well, at least you didn't sign the thing. There's that, anyway."

"I sort of lied about that," Angie said. Her friend did not answer. Angie said, "Please, you have to come with me. Please."

"Get over there," Melissa said finally. "Go, now — I'll meet you."

Living closer, Angie reached the Petrakis house first, but had no intention of ringing the bell until Melissa got there. She was pacing back

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and forth on the porch, cursing herself, banging her fists against her legs, and wondering whether she could go to live with her father's sister Peggy in Grand Rapids, when the woman next door called over to tell her that the Petrakises were all out of town at a family gathering. "Left yesterday afternoon. Asked me to keep an eye on the place, cause they won't be back till sometime Sunday night. That's how come I'm kind of watching out." She smiled warningly at Angie before she went back indoors.

The very large dog standing behind her stayed outside. He looked about the size of a Winnebago, and plainly had already made up his mind about Angie. She said, "Nice doggie," and he growled. When she tried out "Hey, sweet thing," which was what her father said to all animals, the dog showed his front teeth, and the hair stood up around his shoulders, and he lay down to keep an eye on things himself. Angie said sadly, "I'm usually really good with dogs."

When Melissa arrived, she said, "Well, you shoved it under the door, so it can't be that far inside. Maybe if we got something like a stick or a wire clothes-hanger to hook it back with." But whenever they looked toward the neighboring house, they saw a curtain swaying, and finally they walked away, trying to decide what else to do. But there was nothing; and after a while Angie's throat was too swollen with not crying for her to talk without pain. She walked Melissa back to the bus stop, and they hugged good-bye as though they might never meet again.

Melissa said, "You know, my mother says nothing's ever as bad as you thought it was going to be. I mean, it can't be, because nothing beats all the horrible stuff you can imagine. So maybe...you know...." but she broke down before she could finish. She hugged Angie again and went home.

Alone in her own house, Angie sat quite still in the kitchen and went on not crying. Her entire face hurt with it, and her eyes felt unbearably heavy. Her mind was not moving at all, and she was vaguely grateful for that. She sat there until Marvyn walked in from playing basketball with his friends. Shorter than everyone else, he generally got stepped on a lot, and always came home scraped and bruised. Angie had rather expected him to try making himself taller, or able to jump higher, but he hadn't done anything of the sort so far. He looked at her now, bounced and shot an invisible basketball, and asked quietly, "What's the matter?"

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It may have been the unexpected froggy gentleness of his voice, or simply the sudden fact of his having asked the question at all. Whatever the reason, Angie abruptly burst into furious tears, the rage directed entirely at herself, both for writing the letter to Jake Petrakis in the first place, and for crying about it now. She gestured to Marvyn to go away, but — amazing her further — he stood stolidly waiting for her to grow quiet. When at last she did, he repeated the question. "Angie. What's wrong?"

Angie told him. She was about to add a disclaimer — "You laugh even once, Ex-Lax — " when she realized that it wouldn't be necessary. Marvyn was scratching his head, scrunching up his brow until the eyepatch danced; then abruptly jamming both hands in his pockets and tilting his head back: the poster boy for careless insouciance. He said, almost absently, "I could get it back."

"Oh, right." Angie did not even look up. "Right."

"I could so!" Marvyn was instantly his normal self again. So much for casualness and dispassion. "There's all kinds of things I could do."

Angie dampened a paper towel and tried to do something with her hot, tear-streaked face. "Name two."

"Okay, I will! You remember which mailbox you put it in?"

"Under the door," Angie mumbled. "I put it under the door."

Marvyn snickered then. "*Aww*, like a Valentine." Angie hadn't the energy to hit him, but she made a grab at him anyway, for appearance's sake. "Well, I could make it walk right back out the door, that's one way. Or I bet I could just open the door, if nobody's home. Easiest trick in the world, for us witches."

"They're gone till Sunday night," Angie said. "But there's this lady next door, she's watching the place like a hawk. And even when she's not, she's got this immense dog. I don't care if you're the hottest witch in the world, you do not want to mess with this werewolf."

Marvyn, who — as Angie knew — was wary of big dogs, went back to scratching his head. "Too easy, anyway. No fun, forget it." He sat down next to her, completely absorbed in the problem. "How about I...no, that's kid stuff, anybody could do it. But there's a spell...I could make the letter self-destruct, right there in the house, like in that old TV show. It'd just be a little fluffy pile of ashes — they'd vacuum it up and never know. How about that?" Before Angie could express an opinion, he was

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already shaking his head. "Still too easy. A baby spell, for beginners. I hate those."

"Easy is good," Angie told him earnestly. "I like easy. And you *are* a beginner."

Marvyn was immediately outraged, his normal bass-baritone rumble going up to a wounded squeak. "I am not! No way in the world I'm a beginner!" He was up and stamping his feet, as he had not done since he was two. "I tell you what — just for that, I'm going to get your letter back for you, but I'm not going to tell you how. You'll see, that's all. You just wait and see."

He was stalking away toward his room when Angie called after him, with the first glimmer both of hope and of humor that she had felt in approximately a century, "All right, you're a big bad witch king. What do you want?"

Marvyn turned and stared, uncomprehending.

Angie said, "Nothing for nothing, that's my bro. So let's hear it — what's your price for saving my life?"

If Marvyn's voice had gone up any higher, only bats could have heard it. "I'm rescuing you, and you think I want something for it? Julius Christmas!" which was the only swearword he was ever allowed to get away with. "You don't have anything I want, anyway. Except maybe...."

He let the thought hang in space, uncompleted. Angie said, "Except maybe what?"

Marvyn swung on the doorframe one-handed, grinning his pirate grin at her. "I hate you calling me Ex-Lax. You know I hate it, and you keep doing it."

"Okay, I won't do it anymore, ever again. I promise."

"Mmm. Not good enough." The grin had grown distinctly evil. "I think you ought to call me O Mighty One for two weeks."

"What?" Now Angie was on her feet, misery briefly forgotten. "Give it up, Ex-Lax — two weeks? No chance!" They glared at each other in silence for a long moment before she finally said, "A week. Don't push it. One week, no more. And not in front of people!"

"Ten days." Marvyn folded his arms. "Starting right now." Angie went on glowering. Marvyn said, "You want that letter?"

"Yes."

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Marvyn waited.

"Yes, O Mighty One." Triumphant, Marvyn held out his hand and Angie slapped it. She said, "When?"

"Tonight. No, tomorrow — going to the movies with Sunil and his family tonight. Tomorrow." He wandered off, and Angie took her first deep breath in what felt like a year and a half. She wished she could tell Melissa that things were going to be all right, but she didn't dare; so she spent the day trying to appear normal — just the usual Angie, aimlessly content on a Saturday afternoon. When Marvyn came home from the movies, he spent the rest of the evening reading *Hellboy* comics in his room, with the Milady-kitten on his stomach. He was still doing it when Angie gave up peeking in at him and went to bed.

But he was gone on Sunday morning. Angie knew it the moment she woke up.

She had no idea where he could be, or why. She had rather expected him to work whatever spell he settled on in his bedroom, under the stern gaze of his wizard mentors. But he wasn't there, and he didn't come to breakfast. Angie told their mother that they'd been up late watching television together, and that she should probably let Marvyn sleep in. And when Mrs. Luke grew worried after breakfast, Angie went to his room herself, returning with word that Marvyn was working intensely on a project for his art class, and wasn't feeling sociable. Normally she would never have gotten away with it, but her parents were on their way to brunch and a concert, leaving her with the usual instructions to feed and water the cat, use the twenty on the cabinet for something moderately healthy, and to check on Marvyn "now and then," which actually meant frequently. ("The day we don't tell you that," Mr. Luke said once, when she objected to the regular duty, "will be the very day the kid steals a kayak and heads for Tahiti." Angie found it hard to argue the point.)

Alone in the empty house — more alone than she felt she had ever been — Angie turned constantly in circles, wandering from room to room with no least notion of what to do. As the hours passed and her brother failed to return, she found herself calling out to him aloud. "Marvyn? Marvyn, I swear, if you're doing this to drive me crazy...O Mighty One, where are you? You get back here, never mind the damn letter, just get

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back!" She stopped doing this after a time, because the cracks and tremors in her voice embarrassed her, and made her even more afraid.

Strangely, she seemed to feel him in the house all that time. She kept whirling to look over her shoulder, thinking that he might be sneaking up on her to scare her, a favorite game since his infancy. But he was never there.

Somewhere around noon the doorbell rang, and Angie tripped over herself scrambling to answer it, even though she had no hope — almost no hope — of its being Marvyn. But it was Lidia at the door — Angie had forgotten that she usually came to clean on Sunday afternoons. She stood there, old and smiling, and Angie hugged her wildly and wailed, "Lidia, Lidia, *socorro*, help me, *ayúdame*, Lidia." She had learned Spanish from the housekeeper when she was too little to know she was learning it.

Lidia put her hands on Angie's shoulders. She held her a little away and looked into her face, saying, "*¿Chuchi, dime qué pasa contigo?*" She had called Angie *Chuchi* since childhood, never explaining the origin or meaning of the word.

"It's Marvyn," Angie whispered. "It's Marvyn." She started to explain about the letter, and Marvyn's promise, but Lidia only nodded and asked no questions. She said firmly, "*El Viejo puede ayudar.*"

Too frantic to pay attention to gender, Angie took her to mean Yemaya, the old woman in the farmer's market who had told Marvyn that he was a *brujo*. She said, "You mean *la santera*," but Lidia shook her head hard. "No, no, *El Viejo*. You go out there, you ask to see *El Viejo*. *Solamente El Viejo. Los otros no pueden ayudarte.*"

The others can't help you. Only the old man. Angie asked where she could find *El Viejo*, and Lidia directed her to a *Santeria* shop on Bowen Street. She drew a crude map, made sure Angie had money with her, kissed her on the cheek and made a blessing sign on her forehead. "*Cuidado, Chuchi,*" she said with a kind of cheerful solemnity, and Angie was out and running for the Gonzales Avenue bus, the same one she took to school. This time she stayed on a good deal farther.

The shop had no sign, and no street number, and it was so small that Angie kept walking past it for some while. Her attention was finally caught by the objects in the one dim window, and on the shelves to right and left. There was an astonishing variety of incense, and of candles

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encased in glass with pictures of black saints, as well as boxes marked Fast Money Ritual Kit, and bottles of Elegua Floor Wash, whose label read "Keeps Trouble From Crossing Your Threshold." When Angie entered, the musky scent of the place made her feel dizzy and heavy and out of herself, as she always felt when she had a cold coming on. She heard a rooster crowing, somewhere in back.

She didn't see the old woman until her chair creaked slightly, because she was sitting in a corner, halfway hidden by long hanging garments like church choir robes, but with symbols and patterns on them that Angie had never seen before. The woman was very old, much older even than Lidia, and she had an absurdly small pipe in her toothless mouth. Angie said, "Yemaya?" The old woman looked at her with eyes like dead planets.

Angie's Spanish dried up completely, followed almost immediately by her English. She said, "My brother...my little brother...I'm supposed to ask for *El Viejo*. The old one, *viejo santero*? Lidia said." She ran out of words in either language at that point. A puff of smoke crawled from the little pipe, but the old woman made no other response.

Then, behind her, she heard a curtain being pulled aside. A hoarse, slow voice said, "*Quieres El Viejo*? Me."

Angie turned and saw him, coming toward her out of a long hallway whose end she could not see. He moved deliberately, and it seemed to take him forever to reach her, as though he were returning from another world. He was black, dressed all in black, and he wore dark glasses, even in the dark, tiny shop. His hair was so white that it hurt her eyes when she stared. He said, "Your brother."

"Yes," Angie said. "Yes. He's doing magic for me — he's getting something I need — and I don't know where he is, but I know he's in trouble, and I want him back!" She did not cry or break down — Marvyn would never be able to say that she cried over him — but it was a near thing.

El Viejo pushed the dark glasses up on his forehead, and Angie saw that he was younger than she had first thought — certainly younger than Lidia — and that there were thick white half-circles under his eyes. She never knew whether they were somehow natural, or the result of heavy makeup; what she did see was that they made his eyes look bigger and

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brighter — all pupil, nothing more. They should have made him look at least slightly comical, like a reverse-image raccoon, but they didn't.

"I know you brother," *El Viejo* said. Angie fought to hold herself still as he came closer, smiling at her with the tips of his teeth. "A *brujito* — little, little witch, we know. Mama and me, we been watching." He nodded toward the old woman in the chair, who hadn't moved an inch or said a word since Angie's arrival. Angie smelled a damp, musty aroma, like potatoes going bad.

"Tell me where he is. Lidia said you could help." Close to, she could see blue highlights in *El Viejo*'s skin, and a kind of V-shaped scar on each cheek. He was wearing a narrow black tie, which she had not noticed at first; for some reason, the vision of him tying it in the morning, in front of a mirror, was more chilling to her than anything else about him. He grinned fully at her now, showing teeth that she had expected to be yellow and stinking, but which were all white and square and a little too large. He said, "*Tu hermano está perdido.* Lost in Thursday."

"Thursday?" It took her a dazed moment to comprehend, and longer to get the words out. "Oh, God, he went back! Like with Milady — he went back to before I...when the letter was still in my backpack. The little showoff — he said forward was hard, coming forward — he wanted to show me he could do it. And he got stuck. Idiot, idiot, idiot!" *El Viejo* chuckled softly, nodding, saying nothing.

"You have to go find him, get him out of there, right now — I've got money." She began digging frantically in her coat pockets.

"No, no money." *El Viejo* waved her offering aside, studying her out of eyes the color of almost-ripened plums. The white markings under them looked real; the eyes didn't. He said, "I take you. We find you brother together."

Angie's legs were trembling so much that they hurt. She wanted to assent, but it was simply not possible. "No. I can't. I can't. You go back there and get him."

El Viejo laughed then: an enormous, astonishing Santa Claus ho-ho-HO, so rich and reassuring that it made Angie smile even as he was snatching her up and stuffing her under one arm. By the time she had recovered from her bewilderment enough to start kicking and fighting, he was walking away with her down the long hall he had come out of a

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moment before. Angie screamed until her voice splintered in her throat, but she could not hear herself: from the moment *El Viejo* stepped back into the darkness of the hallway, all sound had ended. She could hear neither his footsteps nor his laughter — though she could feel him laughing against her — and certainly not her own panicky racket. They could be in outer space. They could be anywhere.

Dazed and disoriented as she was, the hallway seemed to go soundlessly on and on, until wherever they truly were, it could never have been the tiny *Santeria* shop she had entered only — when? — minutes before. It was a cold place, smelling like an old basement; and for all its darkness, Angie had a sense of things happening far too fast on all sides, just out of range of her smothered vision. She could distinguish none of them clearly, but there was a sparkle to them all the same.

And then she was in Marvyn's room.

And it was unquestionably Marvyn's room: there were the bearded and beaded occultists on the walls; there were the flannel winter sheets that he slept on all year because they had pictures of the New York Mets ballplayers; there was the complete set of *Star Trek* action figures that Angie had given him at Christmas, posed just so on his bookcase. And there, sitting on the edge of his bed, was Marvyn, looking lonelier than anyone Angie had ever seen in her life.

He didn't move or look up until *El Viejo* abruptly dumped her down in front of him and stood back, grinning like a beartrap. Then he jumped to his feet, burst into tears and started frenziedly climbing her, snuffling, "Angie, Angie, Angie," all the way up. Angie held him, trying somehow to preserve her neck and hair and back all at once, while mumbling, "It's all right, it's okay, I'm here. It's okay, Marvyn."

Behind her, *El Viejo* chuckled, "Crybaby witch — little, little *brujito* crybaby." Angie hefted her blubbering baby brother like a shopping bag, holding him on her hip as she had done when he was little, and turned to face the old man. She said, "Thank you. You can take us home now."

El Viejo smiled — not a grin this time, but a long, slow shutmouth smile like a paper cut. He said, "Maybe we let *him* do it, yes?" and then he turned and walked away and was gone, as though he had simply slipped between the molecules of the air. Angie stood with Marvyn in her arms, trying to peel him off like a Band-Aid, while he clung to her with his chin

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digging hard into the top of her head. She finally managed to dump him down on the bed and stood over him, demanding, "What happened? What were you thinking?" Marvyn was still crying too hard to answer her. Angie said, "You just had to do it this way, didn't you? No silly little beginner spells — you're playing with the big guys now, right, O Mighty One? So what happened? How come you couldn't get back?"

"I don't know!" Marvyn's face was red and puffy with tears, and the tears kept coming while Angie tried to straighten his eyepatch. It was impossible for him to get much out without breaking down again, but he kept wailing, "I don't know what went wrong! I did everything you're supposed to, but I couldn't make it work! I don't know...maybe I forgot...." He could not finish.

"Herbs," Angie said, as gently and calmly as she could. "You left your magic herbs back — " she had been going to say "back home," but she stopped, because they *were* back home, sitting on Marvyn's bed in Marvyn's room, and the confusion was too much for her to deal with just then. She said, "Just tell me. You left the stupid herbs."

Marvyn shook his head until the tears flew, protesting, "No, I didn't, I didn't — look!" He pointed to a handful of grubby dried weeds scattered on the bed — Lidia would have thrown them out in a minute. Marvyn gulped and wiped his nose and tried to stop crying. He said, "They're really hard to find, maybe they're not fresh anymore, I don't know — they've always looked like that. But now they don't work," and he was wailing afresh. Angie told him that Dr. John Dee and Willow would both have been ashamed of him, but it didn't help.

But she also sat with him and put her arm around him, and smoothed his messy hair, and said, "Come on, let's think this out. Maybe it's the herbs losing their juice, maybe it's something else. You did everything the way you did the other time, with Milady?"

"I thought I did." Marvyn's voice was small and shy, not his usual deep croak. "But I don't know anymore, Angie — the more I think about it, the more I don't know. It's all messed up, I can't remember anything now."

"Okay," Angie said. "Okay. So how about we just run through it all again? We'll do it together. You try everything you do remember about — you know — moving around in time, and I'll copy you. I'll do whatever you say."

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Marvyn wiped his nose again and nodded. They sat down cross-legged on the floor, and Marvyn produced the grimy book of paper matches that he always carried with him, in case of firecrackers. Following his directions Angie placed all the crumbly herbs into Milady's dish, and her brother lit them. Or tried to: they didn't blaze up, but smoked and smoldered and smelled like old dust, setting both Angie and Marvyn sneezing almost immediately. Angie coughed and asked, "Did that happen the other time?" Marvyn did not answer.

There was a moment when she thought the charm might actually be going to work. The room around them grew blurry — slightly blurry, granted — and Angie heard indistinct faraway sounds that might have been themselves hurtling forward to sheltering Sunday. But when the fumes of Marvyn's herbs cleared away, they were still sitting in Thursday — they both knew it without saying a word. Angie said, "Okay, so much for that. What about all that special concentration you were telling me about? You think maybe your mind wandered? You pronounce any spells the wrong way? Think, Marvyn!"

"I am thinking! I told you forward was hard!" Marvyn looked ready to start crying again, but he didn't. He said slowly, "Something's wrong, but it's not me. I don't think it's me. Something's *pushing*...." He brightened suddenly. "Maybe we should hold hands or something. Because of there being two of us this time. We could try that."

So they tried the spell that way, and then they tried working it inside a pentagram they made with masking tape on the floor, as Angie had seen such things done on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, even though Marvyn said that didn't really mean anything, and they tried the herbs again, in a special order that Marvyn thought he remembered. They even tried it with Angie saying the spell, after Marvyn had coached her, just on the chance that his voice itself might have been throwing off the pitch or the pronunciation. Nothing helped.

Marvyn gave up before Angie did. Suddenly, while she was trying the spell over herself, one more time — some of the words seemed to heat up in her mouth as she spoke them — he collapsed into a wretched ball of desolation on the floor, moaning over and over, "We're finished, it's finished, we'll never get out of Thursday!" Angie understood that he was only a terrified little boy, but she was frightened too, and it would have

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relieved her to slap him and scream at him. Instead, she tried as best she could to reassure him, saying, "He'll come back for us. He has to."

Her brother sat up, knuckles to his eyes. "No, he doesn't have to! Don't you understand? He knows I'm a witch like him, and he's just going to leave me here, out of his way. I'm sorry, Angie, I'm really sorry!" Angie had almost never heard that word from Marvyn, and never twice in the same sentence.

"Later for all that," she said. "I was just wondering — do you think we could get Mom and Dad's attention when they get home? You think they'd realize what's happened to us?"

Marvyn shook his head. "You haven't seen me all the time I've been gone. I saw you, and I screamed and hollered and everything, but you never knew. They won't either. We're not really in our house — we're just here. We'll always be here."

Angie meant to laugh confidently, to give them both courage, but it came out more of a hiccupy snort. "Oh, no. No way. There is no way I'm spending the rest of my life trapped in your stupid bedroom. We're going to try this useless mess one more time, and then...then I'll do something else." Marvyn seemed about to ask her what else she could try, but he checked himself, which was good.

They attempted the spell more than one more time. They tried it in every style they could think of except standing on their heads and reciting the words backward, and they might just as well have done that, for all the effect it had. Whether Marvyn's herbs had truly lost all potency, or whether Marvyn had simply forgotten some vital phrase, they could not even recapture the fragile awareness of something almost happening that they had both felt on the first trial. Again and again they opened their eyes to last Thursday.

"Okay," Angie said at last. She stood up, to stretch cramped legs, and began to wander around the room, twisting a couple of the useless herbs between her fingers. "Okay," she said again, coming to a halt midway between the bedroom door and the window, facing Marvyn's small bureau. A leg of his red Dr. Seuss pajamas was hanging out of one of the drawers.

"Okay," she said a third time. "Let's go home."

Marvyn had fallen into a kind of fetal position, sitting up but with his

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arms tight around his knees and his head down hard on them. He did not look up at her words. Angie raised her voice. "Let's go, Marvyn. That hallway — tunnel-thing, whatever it is — it comes out right about where I'm standing. That's where *El Viejo* brought me, and that's the way he left when he...left. That's the way back to Sunday."

"It doesn't matter," Marvyn whimpered. "*El Viejo*...he's him! He's *him!*"

Angie promptly lost what little remained of her patience. She stalked over to Marvyn and shook him to his feet, dragging him to a spot in the air as though she were pointing out a painting in a gallery. "And you're Marvyn Luke, and you're the big bad new witch in town! You said it yourself — if you weren't, he'd never have bothered sticking you away here. Not even nine, and you can eat his lunch, and he knows it! Straighten your patch and take us home, bro." She nudged him playfully. "Oh, forgive me — I meant to say, O Mighty One."

"You don't have to call me that anymore." Marvyn's legs could barely hold him up, and he sagged against her, a dead weight of despair. "I can't, Angie. I can't get us home. I'm sorry...."

The good thing — and Angie knew it then — would have been to turn and comfort him: to take his cold, wet face between her hands and tell him that all would yet be well, that they would soon be eating popcorn with far too much butter on it in his real room in their real house. But she was near her own limit, and pretending calm courage for his sake was prodding her, in spite of herself, closer to the edge. Without looking at Marvyn, she snapped, "Well, I'm not about to die in last Thursday! I'm walking out of here the same way he did, and you can come with me or not, that's up to you. But I'll tell you one thing, Ex-Lax — I won't be looking back."

And she stepped forward, walking briskly toward the dangling Dr. Seuss pajamas...

...and into a thick, sweet-smelling grayness that instantly filled her eyes and mouth, her nose and her ears, disorienting her so completely that she flailed her arms madly, all sense of direction lost, with no idea of which way she might be headed, drowning in syrup like a trapped bee or butterfly. Once she thought she heard Marvyn's voice, and called out for him — "I'm here, I'm here!" But she did not hear him again.

Then, between one lunge for air and another, the grayness was gone,

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leaving not so much as a dampness on her skin, nor even a sickly aftertaste of sugar in her mouth. She was back in the time-tunnel, as she had come to think of it, recognizing the uniquely dank odor: a little like the ashes of a long-dead fire, and a little like what she imagined moonlight might smell like, if it had a smell. The image was an ironic one, for she could see no more than she had when *El Viejo* was lugging her the other way under his arm. She could not even distinguish the ground under her feet; she knew only that it felt more like slippery stone than anything else, and she was careful to keep her footing as she plodded steadily forward.

The darkness was absolute — strange solace, in a way, since she could imagine Marvyn walking close behind her, even though he never answered her, no matter how often or how frantically she called his name. She moved along slowly, forcing her way through the clinging murk, vaguely conscious, as before, of a distant, flickering sense of sound and motion on every side of her. If there were walls to the time-tunnel, she could not touch them; if it had a roof, no air currents betrayed it; if there were any living creature in it besides herself, she felt no sign. And if time actually passed there, Angie could never have said. She moved along, her eyes closed, her mind empty, except for the formless fear that she was not moving at all, but merely raising and setting down her feet in the same place, endlessly. She wondered if she was hungry.

Not until she opened her eyes in a different darkness to the crowing of a rooster and a familiar heavy aroma did she realize that she was walking down the hallway leading from the *Santeria* shop to...wherever she had really been — and where Marvyn still must be, for he plainly had not followed her. She promptly turned and started back toward last Thursday, but halted at the deep, slightly grating chuckle behind her. She did not turn again, but stood very still.

El Viejo walked a slow full circle around her before he faced her, grinning down at her like the man in the moon. The dark glasses were off, and the twin scars on his cheeks were blazing up as though they had been slashed into him a moment before. He said, "I know. Before even I see you, I know."

Angie hit him in the stomach as hard as she could. It was like punching a frozen slab of beef, and she gasped in pain, instantly certain that she had broken her hand. But she hit him again, and again, screaming

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at the top of her voice, "Bring my brother back! If you don't bring him right back here, right now, I'll kill you! I will!"

El Viejo caught her hands, surprisingly gently, still laughing to himself. "Little girl, listen, listen now. Niñita, nobody else — nobody — ever do what you do. You understand? Nobody but me ever walk that road back from where I leave you, understand?" The big white half-circles under his eyes were stretching and curling like live things.

Angie pulled away from him with all her strength, as she had hit him. She said, "No. That's Marvyn. Marvyn's the witch, the *brujo* — don't go telling people it's me. Marvyn's the one with the power."

"Him?" Angie had never heard such monumental scorn packed into one syllable. *El Viejo* said, "Your brother nothing, nobody, we no bother with him. Forget him — you the one got the *regalo*, you just don't know." The big white teeth filled her vision; she saw nothing else. "I show you — me, *El Viejo*. I show you what you are."

It was beyond praise, beyond flattery. For all her dread and dislike of *El Viejo*, to have someone of his wicked wisdom tell her that she was like him in some awful, splendid way made Angie shiver in her heart. She wanted to turn away more than she had ever wanted anything — even Jake Petrakis — but the long walk home to Sunday was easier than breaking the clench of the white-haired man's malevolent presence would have been. Having often felt (and almost as often dismissed the notion) that Marvyn was special in the family by virtue of being the baby, and a boy — and now a potent witch — she let herself revel in the thought that the real gift was hers, not his, and that if she chose she had only to stretch out her hand to have her command settle home in it. It was at once the most frightening and the most purely, completely gratifying feeling she had ever known.

But it was not tempting. Angie knew the difference.

"Forget it," she said. "Forget it, buster. You've got nothing to show me."

El Viejo did not answer her. The old, old eyes that were all pupil continued slipping over her like hands, and Angie went on glaring back with the blue eyes she despaired of because they could never be as deep-set and deep green as her mother's eyes. They stood so — for how long, she never knew — until *El Viejo* turned and opened his mouth as though to speak to the silent old lady whose own stone eyes seemed not to have

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blinked since Angie had first entered the *Santeria* shop, a childhood ago. Whatever he meant to say, he never got the words out, because Marvyn came back then.

He came down the dark hall from a long way off, as *El Viejo* had done the first time she saw him — as she herself had trudged forever, only moments ago. But Marvyn had come a further journey: Angie could see that beyond doubt in the way he stumbled along, looking like a shadow casting a person. He was struggling to carry something in his arms, but she could not make out what it was. As long as she watched him approaching, he seemed hardly to draw any nearer.

Whatever he held looked too heavy for a small boy: it threatened constantly to slip from his hands, and he kept shifting it from one shoulder to the other, and back again. Before Angie could see it clearly, *El Viejo* screamed, and she knew on the instant that she would never hear a more terrible sound in her life. He might have been being skinned alive, or having his soul torn out of his body — she never even tried to tell herself what it was like, because there were no words. Nor did she tell anyone that she fell down at the sound, fell flat down on her hands and knees, and rocked and whimpered until the scream stopped. It went on for a long time.

When it finally stopped, *El Viejo* was gone, and Marvyn was standing beside her with a baby in his arms. It was black and immediately endearing, with big, bright, strikingly watchful eyes. Angie looked into them once, and looked quickly away.

Marvyn looked worn and exhausted. His eyepatch was gone, and the left eye that Angie had not seen for months was as bloodshot as though he had just come off a three-day drunk — though she noticed that it was not wandering at all. He said in a small, dazed voice, "I had to go back a really long way, Angie. Really long."

Angie wanted to hold him, but she was afraid of the baby. Marvyn looked toward the old woman in the corner and sighed; then hitched up his burden one more time and clumped over to her. He said, "Ma'am, I think this is yours?" Adults always commented on Marvyn's excellent manners.

The old woman moved then, for the first time. She moved like a wave, Angie thought: a wave seen from a cliff or an airplane, crawling along so

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slowly that it seemed impossible for it ever to break, ever to reach the shore. But the sea was in that motion, all of it caught up in that one wave; and when she set down her pipe, took the baby from Marvyn and smiled, that was the wave too. She looked down at the baby, and said one word, which Angie did not catch. Then Angie had her brother by the arm, and they were out of the shop. Marvyn never looked back, but Angie did, in time to see the old woman baring blue gums in soundless laughter.

All the way home in a taxi, Angie prayed silently that her parents hadn't returned yet. Lidia was waiting, and together they whisked Marvyn into bed without any serious protest. Lidia washed his face with a rough cloth, and then slapped him and shouted at him in Spanish — Angie learned a few words she couldn't wait to use — and then she kissed him and left, and Angie brought him a pitcher of orange juice and a whole plate of gingersnaps, and sat on the bed and said, "What happened?"

Marvyn was already working on the cookies as though he hadn't eaten in days — which, in a sense, was quite true. He asked, with his mouth full, "What's *malcriado* mean?"

"What? Oh. Like badly raised, badly brought up — troublemaking kid. About the only thing Lidia didn't call you. Why?"

"Well, that's what that lady called...him. The baby."

"Right," Angie said. "Leave me a couple of those, and tell me how he got to be a baby. You did like with Milady?"

"Uh-huh. Only I had to go way, way, way back, like I told you." Marvyn's voice took on the faraway sound it had had in the *Santeria* shop. "Angie, he's so old."

Angie said nothing. Marvyn said in a whisper, "I couldn't follow you, Angie. I was scared."

"Forget it," she answered. She had meant to be soothing, but the words burst out of her. "If you just hadn't had to show off, if you'd gotten that letter back some simple, ordinary way — " Her entire chest froze solid at the word. "The letter! We forgot all about my stupid letter!" She leaned forward and snatched the plate of cookies away from Marvyn. "Did you forget? You forgot, didn't you?" She was shaking as had not happened even when *El Viejo* had hold of her. "Oh, God, after all that!"

But Marvyn was smiling for the first time in a very long while. "Calm down, be cool — I've got it here." He dug her letter to Jake Petrakis — more

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than a little grimy by now — out of his back pocket and held it out to Angie. "There. Don't say I never did nuttin' for you." It was a favorite phrase of his, gleaned from a television show, and most often employed when he had fed Milady, washed his breakfast dish, or folded his clothes. "Take it, open it up," he said now. "Make sure it's the right one."

"I don't need to," Angie protested irritably. "It's my letter — believe me, I know it when I see it." But she opened the envelope anyway and withdrew a single folded sheet of paper, which she glanced at...then *stared* at, in absolute disbelief.

She handed the sheet to Marvyn. It was empty on both sides.

"Well, you did your job all right," she said, mildly enough, to her stunned, slack-jawed brother. "No question about that. I'm just trying to figure out why we had to go through this whole incredible hooha for a blank sheet of paper."

Marvyn actually shrank away from her in the bed.

"I didn't do it, Angie! I swear!" Marvyn scrambled to his feet, standing up on the bed with his hands raised, as though to ward her off in case she attacked him. "I just grabbed it out of your backpack — I never even looked at it."

"And what, I wrote the whole thing in grapefruit juice, so nobody could read it unless you held it over a lamp or something? Come on, it doesn't matter now. Get your feet off the pillow and sit down."

Marvyn obeyed warily, crouching rather than sitting next to her on the edge of the bed. They were silent together for a little while before he said, "You did that. With the letter. You wanted it not written so much, it just *wasn't.* That's what happened."

"Oh, right," she said. "Me being the dynamite witch around here. I told you, it doesn't matter."

"It matters." She had grown so unused to seeing a two-eyed Marvyn that his expression seemed more than doubly earnest to her just then. He said, quite quietly, "You are the dynamite witch, Angie. He was after you, not me."

This time she did not answer him. Marvyn said, "I was the bait. I do garbage bags and clarinets — okay, and I make ugly dolls walk around. What's he care about that? But he knew you'd come after me, so he held me there — back there in Thursday — until he could grab you. Only he

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didn't figure you could walk all the way home on your own, without any spells or anything. I know that's how it happened, Angie! That's how I know you're the real witch."

"No," she said, raising her voice now. "No, I was just pissed off, that's different. Never underestimate the power of a pissed-off woman, O Mighty One. But you...you went all the way back, on *your* own, and you grabbed *him*. You're going to be *way* stronger and better than he is, and he knows it. He just figured he'd get rid of the competition early on, while he had the chance. Not a generous guy, *El Viejo*."

Marvyn's chubby face turned gray. "But I'm *not* like him! I don't want to be like him!" Both eyes suddenly filled with tears, and he clung to his sister as he had not done since his return. "It was horrible, Angie, it was so horrible. You were gone, and I was all alone, and I didn't know what to do, only I had to do *something*. And I remembered Milady, and I figured if he wasn't letting me come forward I'd go the other way, and I was so scared and mad I just walked and walked and walked in the dark, until I...." He was crying so hard that Angie could hardly make the words out. "I don't want to be a witch anymore, Angie, I don't *want* to! And I don't want *you* being a witch either...."

Angie held him and rocked him, as she had loved doing when he was three or four years old, and the cookies got scattered all over the bed. "It's all right," she told him, with one ear listening for their parents' car pulling into the garage. "*Shh, shh*, it's all right, it's over, we're safe, it's okay, *shh*. It's okay, we're not going to be witches, neither one of us." She laid him down and pulled the covers back over him. "You go to sleep now."

Marvyn looked up at her, and then at the wizards' wall beyond her shoulder. "I might take some of those down," he mumbled. "Maybe put some soccer players up for a while. The Brazilian team's really good." He was just beginning to doze off in her arms, when suddenly he sat up again and said, "Angie? The baby?"

"What about the baby? I thought he made a beautiful baby, *El Viejo*. Mad as hell, but lovable."

"It was bigger when we left," Marvyn said. Angie stared at him. "I looked back at it in that lady's lap, and it was already bigger than when I was carrying it. He's starting over, Angie, like Milady."

"Better him than me," Angie said. "I hope he gets a kid brother this

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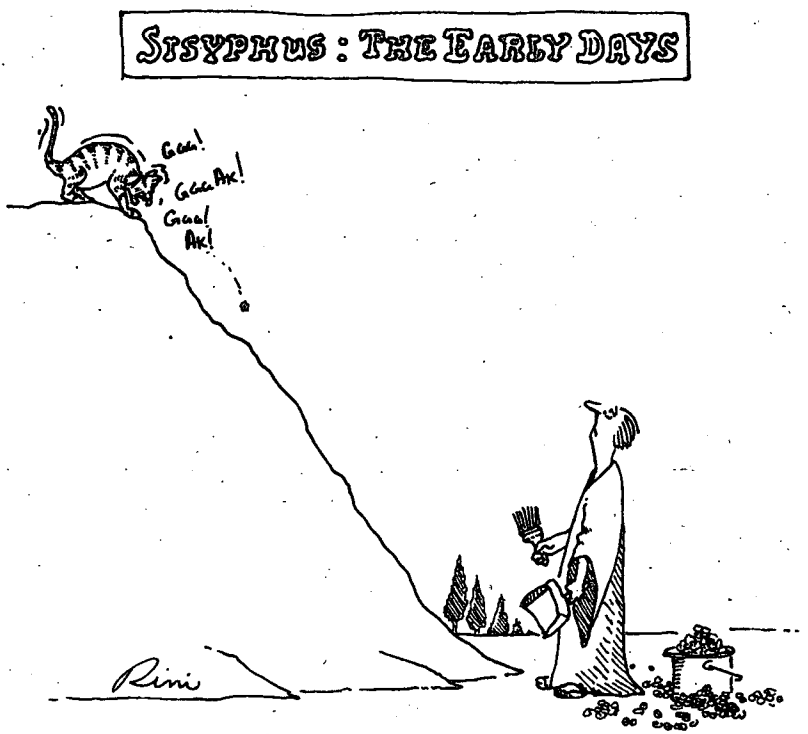
time, he's got it coming." She heard the car, and then the sound of a key in the lock. She said, "Go to sleep, don't worry about it. After what we've been through, we can handle anything. The two of us. And without witchcraft. Whichever one of us it is — no witch stuff."

Marvyn smiled drowsily. "Unless we really, *really* need it." Angie held out her hand and they slapped palms in formal agreement. She looked down at her fingers and said, "*Ick!* Blow your *nose!*"

But Marvyn was asleep.



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Carol Emshwiller is the author of such novels as Carmen Dog, Ledoyt, *and* Mister Boots. *She reports from her desert home in California that she is currently working on a novel expanded from her story "World of No Return" (which appeared in* Asimov's *magazine earlier this year). Her new story for us is a grim vision of the future. She thanks* F&SF *assistant editor John J. Adams for encouraging her to write this one.*

Killers

By Carol Emshwiller

MOST PEOPLE LEFT BECAUSE of no water. I don't know where they found a place where things were any better. Some of us felt safer here than anywhere else. And even way before the war wound down, it was hard to pick up and go someplace. No gas for civilians. Pretty soon no gas at all.

After the bombing of our pipeline (one man with a grenade could have done that), we got together and moved the town up higher, along a stream and put in ditches so that the water came past several houses. We have to carry water into the house in buckets and we have to empty the sink by hand, back out into the yard. At least the water flows into our kitchen gardens and past our fruit trees. In warm weather, we bathe in our irrigation ditch, in colder we sponge off inside, in basins, but there's hardly any cold weather anymore.

There wasn't much to moving the town since most of us were gone already. All the able-bodied men, of course, so it took us women to make the move ourselves and without horses or mules. The enemy stole them or killed them or maimed them just to make things harder for us.

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No electricity, though some of the women think they can hook the dam back up and get some. Nobody has bothered to try it yet. In a way none of this bothers me as much as you'd think. I always liked walking, and we have rendered fat lamps and candles that send out a soft, cozy glow.

Our house was already well above where the town used to be. Good because I didn't want to move. I want my brother to have our old home to come back to. And besides, I couldn't move Mother.

Beyond our back yard there used to be the Department of Water and Power, after that Forest Service land, and then the John Muir wilderness. Now the town has moved above me, and of course there's no DWP or Forest Service anymore.

Our house has a good view. We always sat on the front steps and looked at the mountains. Now that everybody has moved up the mountain side, everybody has a good view.

The town below is empty. The Vons and K-mart are big looted barns. Up here there's one small store where we sell each other our produce or our sewing and knitting. Especially socks. Hard to get socks these days. Before the war we were so wasteful nobody darned anymore, but now we not only darn but reinforce the heels and toes of brand new socks before we wear them.

We moved the little library up. Actually it's got more books than before. We brought all the books we could find, ours and those from the people who left. We don't need a librarian. Everybody brings them back honor system.

We have a little hospital but no doctors, just a couple of elderly nurses who were too old to be recruited. They're in their seventies and still going. They've trained new ones. No medicines though. Only what we can get from local herbs. We went to the Paiute to find out more. There's a couple of Paiute nurses, who come to help out every now and then, though they have their own nursing to do on the reservation. (They moved the rez up, too, and they don't call it the reservation anymore.)

It's a woman's town now. Full of women's arts and crafts.... Quilt makers, sweater knitters.... And the women do the heavy work. There's a good roof repair group and there's carpenters....

Lots of women went to war along with the men, but I had to look after Mother. I was taking care of her even before my brother left. She wasn't

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exactly sick but she was fat and she drank. Her legs looked terrible, full of varicosities. It hurt her to walk so she didn't. When the war came she got a little better because of the shortages, though there was still plenty of homemade beer, but she couldn't walk. Or wouldn't. I think her muscles had all withered away. Looking after somebody who can't walk seems normal to me. I've done it since I can first remember anything.

Now that Mother's gone I have a chance to do something useful. If I knew the war was still going on in some specific place, I'd go fight, but it *seems* to be over. Maybe. It didn't stop exactly. I don't know how it ended or even if it's ended. We don't have a way to find out, but there hasn't been any action that we know of for quite some time. Overhead, nothing flies by. Not even anything old fashioned. (Not that we ever had any action to speak of way out here. Except for the bombing of our pipeline and stealing our livestock, nobody cared much about us.)

But that's the way the war was, hardly a beginning and hardly an end. Wars aren't like they used to be — with two clearly separated sides. The enemy was among us even before it started. They could never win a real old-fashioned war with us, they were weak and low tech, but low tech was good enough as long as there were lots of them. You never knew who to trust, and we still don't. Our side put all we could in internment camps, practically everybody with black eyes and hair and olive skin, but you can't get them all. And then the war went on so long we used up all our resources, but they still had theirs — sabotage doesn't ever have to stop. They escaped from the camps. Actually they just walked away. The guards had already walked away, too.

Lots of those men brought their injuries and craziness to our mountains. Both sides came here to get away from everything. They're hermits. They don't trust anybody. Some of them are still fighting each other up there. It's almost as bad as having left-over mine fields. They're all damaged, physically or mentally. Of course most likely all of us are, too, and we probably don't even know it.

My brother might be out there somewhere. If he's alive he's got to be here. He loves this place. He hunted and trapped and fished. He'd get along fine and I know he'd do anything to come back.

Most of those men don't come down to us even if they're starving or cold or sick. Those that do, come to steal. They take our tomatoes and corn

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and radishes. Other things disappear, too. Kitchen knives, spoons, fishhooks.... And of course sweaters and woolen socks.... Those crazies live up even higher than we do. It does still get cold up there.

And they are crazies. And now one of them has been killing other men and dumping them at the edge of the village. They've all been shot in the back by wooden crossbow darts. Beautifully carved and polished. I hope it isn't one of our side. Though I don't suppose sides matter anymore.

Every time this happens, before we put them into the depository, I go to check if it's my brother. I wouldn't want my brother in the depository. Ever. But those men are always such a mess — dirty and bearded — I wonder, would I recognize him? I keep thinking: How could I not? But I was only fifteen when he left. He was eighteen. He'd be thirty-two now. If he's alive.

We're all a little edgy even if it's not us getting killed. And then last night I saw someone looking in my window. I'd been asleep but I heard a noise and woke up. I saw the silhouette of a lumpy hat and a mass of tangled hair flying out from under it, the moonlit sky glowing behind. I called out, "Clement!" I didn't mean to. I was half asleep and in that state I knew it was my brother. Whoever it was ducked down in a hurry and I heard the crunch, crunch of somebody running away. Afterwards I got scared. I could have been shot as I slept.

The next morning I saw footprints and it looked like somebody had spent some time behind my shed.

I keep hoping it's my brother, though I wouldn't want him to be the one killing those poor men, but you'd think he wouldn't be afraid of coming to his own house. Of course he doesn't know that Mother is dead. I can understand him being afraid of her. They never got along. When she was drunk she used to throw things at him. If he got close enough, she'd grab his arm and twist. Then he got too strong for her. But he couldn't be afraid of me. Could he? I'm the baby sister.

Mother was nicer to me. She got worried I'd stay out of reach or not help anymore. I could have just walked off and left her but until she died I didn't think of it. I actually didn't. I'd looked after her for so long I thought that's just the way life is. And I might not have left, anyway. She *was* my mother and there was nobody else to look after her but me.

If it's my brother been looking in the window, he must know Mother

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isn't here. She never left her bed. The house is small and all on one floor so he could have looked in all the windows. We have three tiny bedrooms, and one kitchen/living room combined. Mother and her big bed took up wall to wall space in the biggest bedroom.

I POSTED CLEMENT'S picture at the store and the library, but of course it was a picture from long ago. In it he has the usual army shaved head. I drew a version with wild hair. Then I drew another of him bald with wild hair around the sides. (Baldness runs in our family.) I drew a different kind of beard on each of them. I put up both versions.

Leo at the store said, "He might not want to talk to you...or anybody."

But I know that already.

"I think he's come looking in my window."

"Well, there you are. He'd a come in if he'd wanted to."

"You went to war. How come you're okay and most all the other men have gone wild?"

"I was lucky. I never saw real horror."

Actually he may not be so okay. Most of us never married. We never had the chance with all the men gone. He could have married one of us but he never did. He lives in a messy shed behind the store and he smells, even though the ditch passes right by his store. And he's always grumpy. You have to get used to him.

"If my brother comes around, tell him I'm going out to look for him in all his favorite spots."

"Even if you find him he won't come back."

"So then I'll go after that crazy person who's been killing those men."

Truth is, I don't know what to do with myself. I don't know how to live with just me to care about. I can go anywhere and do anything. I ought to find the man who's the killer. I have nothing else to do. Who better to do it than I?

But I might find that man right here, hiding at the edge of the village — or most likely looking in my window. Maybe I can trap him in my house. He must have been looking in for a reason.

I pack up and pretend to leave. I stay out of sight of the village. This

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is wild rocky land — lots of hiding places. Nobody will know I didn't go anywhere. My backpack is mostly empty. I have pepper. Pepper is hard to get these days so I've saved mine for a weapon. I have a small knife in my boot and a bigger one at my belt. Streams aren't stocked anymore but there's still fish around, though not as many as before. I bring a line and hooks. I'll use those today. I won't go far.

I catch a trout. I have to make a fire the old-fashioned way. No more matches. I always carry a handful of dead sage fibers for tinder. I cook the fish and eat it. After dark and the half moon comes up, I sneak back to our house as if I was one of those crazies myself.

The door is wide open. There's sand all over the floor. Couldn't he even shut the door? These days we have sand storms and dust devils more often than we used to. Doesn't whoever it is know that? And that's another reason to move higher up, into the trees where it's less deserty.

I smell him before I see him. I put my knife up my sleeve so it'll drop down into my hand.

I can hear him breathing. Sounds like scared breathing. A man this frightened will be dangerous.

He's huddled in Mother's bedroom down between the bed and the bedside table. All I see is his hat, pulled low so his face is in shadow. I see his bare knees showing through his torn pants. I have a better look at them than his face.

Right away I think my brother wouldn't be in Mother's room, he'd be in his own room. Besides, the room still smells of death and dying. I call, "Clement?" even though I know it can't be him. "Come on out."

He groans.

"Are you sick?" He sounds sick. I suppose that's why he's here in the first place.

I wish I'd lit a lamp first. I was counting on the moonlight, but there isn't much shining in here. It still could be my brother, under all that dirt and wild hair and beard, gone crazy just like everybody else.

"Come out. Come to the main room. I'll light a lamp. I'll fix you food."

"No light."

"Why not? There's only me. And there's no war going on anymore. It's most likely over."

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"I pledged to fight until I died."

(I suppose my brother did, too.)

I finger my knife. "I'm going to go light the lamp."

I deliberately turn my back. I go to the main room, light the lamp with the sparker, keeping my back to the bedroom door. I hear him come in. I turn and get a good look.

Pieced-together hat, long scraggly hair hanging under it. I can't tell if he's a brown man or just weather-beaten, sunburned, and dirty. A full beard with gray in it. Eyes as black as the enemy's always are. Eyebrows just as thick as theirs. He has a broken front tooth. Nowadays that's not unusual. Nobody to fix them. He has a greenish look under his tan and dark circles around his eyes. If he thinks he isn't sick he doesn't know much.

"You *are* the enemy. And you're half dead already."

There's a chair right beside him, but he sinks sideways to the floor. Ends up flat on our worn linoleum. If he thinks he's still fighting the war, I should kill him now while I have the chance. He looks such a mess and smells so bad I'm almost ready to kill him just for those reasons alone. After Mother died I thought I was finished with disagreeable messes.

"Hide me. Just for tonight. I'll leave in the morning."

"Are you crazy?" I kneel beside him. "You're the one killing people. I should kill you right now."

He's trying to prop himself up against the wall. I don't want to touch him but I grab his shirt front to help him and the rotten cloth rips completely out.

"You stink something awful. And why would I think you won't kill me? You've been killing everybody else."

"I don't have a weapon."

"Strip."

"What?"

"Take those filthy clothes off. I'll burn them. I'll bring you a basin to wash in." (And I'll find out if he has a weapon.)

He hasn't the energy to undress or wash. I hate to touch him but I do it. I'm used to it. Mother was a mess as she was dying. (At the end I sprinkled pine needles all over but it didn't help much.) I thought that was the last of that sort of thing I'd ever have to do. I thought I was free. But,

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all right, one more thing. I wash him and dress him in my brother's old clothes, and...what then? If I kill him, the town will be grateful.

At least his body is entirely different from Mother's, thin and strong and hairy. It's a nice change. If he wasn't so smelly I'd enjoy it. Well, I do enjoy it.

He's half asleep through it all.

I burn his clothes in our little stove. After I've washed him, I feed him jerky broth with an egg in it, though I keep thinking: Why waste my egg on him? He falls asleep right after he's finished the broth. Slides down the wall flat out again, in what seems more a faint than a sleep.

I decide to shave him and cut his hair. He won't notice. If he'd been more conscious I'd have asked him if he wanted a mustache or a little goatee but I'm glad he isn't. I have fun with different haircuts, different sideburns, smaller and smaller mustaches until there's none. Hair, too. I take off more than I meant to, except what does it matter, he's a dead man.

Not a very handsome man whatever way I fixed his hair and beard, though along the way there were some nicer stages — better than what I ended up with. I finish by shaving him. Also not a good job. I make nicks. Where I shaved his beard, his skin is pale. His forehead, where his hat was, is pale too. There's only a sun-browned strip across his face just below his eyes. I like the maleness of him no matter that he's ugly. I don't mind his broken tooth. We're all in the same boat as to teeth.

I fall asleep at the kitchen table, right in the middle of thinking up ways to kill him. Also thinking about how we've all changed — how, in the olden days, I'd not ever have been thinking things at all like that.

IN THE MORNING he seems some better — well enough for me to help him stagger, first to the outhouse, and then into my brother's room. He keeps feeling his face and hair. I stop at the hall mirror and let him take a look. He's shocked. He has a kind of wet cat/plucked chicken look.

I say, "Sorry." I *am* sorry...sorry for anybody who gets their hair cut by me. But he should be glad I haven't slit his throat.

He stares at himself, but then says, "Thank you." And so sincerely that I realize I've made him the best disguise there is. He said, "Hide me," and I did. Nobody will take him for one of those wild men now.

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I prop him up on the pillows of my brother's bed and bring him milk and tea. He looks so much better I wonder.... If he's not going to die on his own, I'll have to think what to do with him.

"What's your name?"

He doesn't answer. He could say anything. I'd have believed him and I'd have had something to call him by.

"Tell me a name. I don't care what."

He thinks, then says, "Jal."

"Make it Joe."

I don't trust him. But if he has any sense at all he knows I'm the only one can keep him safe. Though nobody has much sense anymore.

"Everybody got tired of the war a long time ago." I bang my cup down so hard that my tea spills. "Haven't you noticed?"

"I swore to fight to the death."

"I'll bet you don't even know which side is which anymore. If you ever did."

"You're the ones heated up the planet. It wasn't us. It was you and your greed."

I haven't been so aggravated since my brother was around. "It heated up mostly by itself. It's done that before, you know. Besides, all that's over. Our part in it anyway. Killing crazies isn't going help. You're crazy!" Not the best thing to say to a crazy, but I go on anyway. "All you hermits are crazy. You're nothing but trouble."

He's taking it all in.... Maybe he is. Maybe he just doesn't have the energy to argue.

"I'm going out to get us a rabbit. If you want to keep on making trouble, don't be here when I come back."

I leave. He'll be all alone with my butcher knife and pepper. And I suppose his crossbow isn't far off. I might as well give him a chance to show what he is.

I make the rounds of my traps. They're lower down. I've set them around the town. It's a ghost town. I'm the only one goes down there now and then...usually only on a cool day. Which hardly ever happens. Today it must be well over 110°. Now our whole valley in winter is as if Death Valley in summer.

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What I trap down there are rats. We cook those up and call them rabbit, though nobody cares anymore what we call them.

I find two big black ones, big as cats. We like those better than the small brown kind, lots more meat on them. (Seems as if the rats are getting bigger all the time.) My traps broke their necks. I don't have to worry about killing them. I tie their tails to my belt, then wander the town in hopes of finding something not already scavenged. I find a quarter. I take it though it's worthless. Maybe a Paiute might turn it into jewelry. On purpose I don't climb back up to my house until late afternoon and until I drink all the water I brought.

Before I go in I check around my shed and house for a crossbow and darts, and then beyond, under the bushes, but I don't find them.

He's still there. Asleep. And no weapons that I can see, but I check the kitchen knives. The largest one, big as a machete, is gone. And he might be pretending to be sicker than he is.

Enemy or not, I do like a man in the house. I watch him sleep. He has such long eyelashes. I like the hair on his knuckles. Just looking at his hands makes me think how there's so few men around. Actually only four. His forearms.... Ours don't ever look like that no matter how much we saw and hammer. Even my brother's never looked like that. I like that he already needs a shave again. I even like his bushy eyebrows.

But I have to go clean rats.

When I start rattling around the kitchen section of our main room, he gets up and staggers to the table. Stops at the hall mirror again on the way and studies himself for a long time. As if he forgot what he looked like under all that hair. He sits, then, and watches me make two-rat stew with wild onions and turnips. I thicken it with acorn flour I traded for with the Paiute.

It takes a while for the stew to finish up. I make squaw tea and sit across from him. Being so close and looking into his eyes upsets me. I have to get up and turn my back. I pretend the stew needs stirring. To hide my feelings I say, "Where's your crossbow? And where's my knife? I won't let you have my stew until you tell me." I sound more angry than I meant to.

"Under the bed in the big room. Both of them."

I go check and there they are, and several darts. I bring the bow back

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to the table. It's a beautiful piece of work. Old scraps of metal and an old screw, salvaged from something, now shiny and oiled. The wood of the bow, carved as if a work of art. All kept up with care. I'll bring it to the town meeting to show I've found the killer and dealt with him. But have I? And they may want a body.

"I'll not shoot anybody. Not now."

"Yeah. But you're still sworn."

"I can fight someplace else."

"Oh yeah."

After we eat I put what's left over into an old bear-proof can, take it to the irrigation ditch, and sink it in wet mud to keep it cool.

I don't know if I should go to bed without barricading my door some way. I wish I still had our dog but Mother and I ate him long ago. He'd be dead by now anyway. It would be nice to have him, though. I'd feel a lot safer. He was a good dog but getting old. We thought we'd better eat him ourselves before somebody else got to him. That was before we were eating rats.

Tired as I am, it takes a while for me to get to sleep. I keep telling myself, if he's going to sneak into my room, I might as well find out about it. But I put the chair against the door in a way that it'll fall. At least I'll hear if he comes in.

Mainly I can't sleep because, in spite of my better judgment, I'm thinking of keeping the man. Trying to. I like the idea of having him around even though it's scary. I make plans.

It's logical that somebody coming in to our new higher village would come to my house first. Perhaps an outsider with news from the North. And it's logical that I'd take him to a town meeting to tell the news.

What news, though? In the morning (the chair hasn't fallen), we make some up. Carson City is as empty and rat-infested as our town. (It's a good bet it really is.) I remember an airplane (I think it was called the gossamer condor) that flew by the propeller being pumped by a bicycle and doesn't need gas. It can't go far or we'd have seen it down here. Joe can say he's seen it.

He says, "How about an epidemic of a new disease passed on by fleas? It hasn't reached here yet." He says, "How about, way up in Reno, they found a cache of ammunition so they can clean up their old guns and use them again?"

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I give him news about Clement to tell people. I'll say that's another reason Joe came to me first — to give me news of my brother. (I think I made up that news because I know my brother's dead. Otherwise I'd not have mentioned anything about him. I'd keep on thinking he's out in our mountains as one of the crazies, but I don't think I ever really believed that. I just hoped.)

Once he takes my hand and squeezes it — says how grateful he is. I have to get up again, turn my back. I wash our few dishes, slowly. I'm so flustered I hardly know what his hand felt like. Strong and warm. I know that.

Lots of good things happen in those town meetings. We give each other our news. We have all kinds of helping committees. In some ways we take care of each other more than we did before the war. People used to bring in their deer and wild sheep and share the meat around, except there's less and less wild game and more and more mountain lions. They're eating all the game and we're not good at killing lions. I'll bet Joe would be, with his crossbow.

So I bring him to the meeting. Introduce him. They crowd around and ask questions about all their favorite spots, or places where they used to have relatives. He's good at making stuff up. Makes me wonder, was he once an officer? Or did he act?

I admire him more and more, and I can see all the women do, too. He could have any one of us. I'm worried he'll get away from me and I'm the only one knows who he really is. Whoever gets him in the end will have to be careful.

He's looking pretty good, too, horrible haircut and all. My brother's blue farmer shirt sets off his brown skin. It's too large for him, but that's the usual.

The women have been out at the bird nets and had made a big batch of little-bird soup. I was glad they'd made that instead of the other.

There's a Paiute woman who comes to our meetings and reports back to the reservation. She's beautiful — more than beautiful, strange and striking. I should have known. At his first view of her you can see...both of them stare and then, quickly, stop looking at each other.

Later he sits drinking tea with several women including the Paiute. They all crowd around but I saw him push in so that he was next to her.

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The tables are small but now nine chairs are wedged in close around the one where he sits. I can't see what's going on, but I do see her shoulder is touching his. And their faces are so close I don't see how they can see anything of each other.

I sneak away and run home. I wish I'd saved his smelly, falling-apart clothes. I wish I'd saved the dirty, tangled hair I cut off, but I burned that, too. I do find the old hat. That helps them to believe me. I bring the crossbow. It also helps that he tries to get away.

They hung Joe up in the depository. I told them not to tell me anything about it. I'd rather not know when we get around to using him.

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We first met Maggot, the young man raised as a troll, in "A Democracy of Trolls" back in our Oct/Nov. 2002 issue. Maggot went on to appear in the novel The Prodigal Troll, *which chronicles his origin and some of his adventures in the world of men. This new adventure finds him on his own again—*

Abandon the Ruins

By Charles Coleman Finlay

THAT WINTER MAGGOT forged a new trail east out of the mountains, down into a wilderness occupied by neither men nor trolls. Great-tusked woolly mammoths wandered among herds of buffalo and flat-horned elk. They were stalked by packs of broad-necked, trap-jawed dyrewolves and solitary dagger-toothed lions. Maggot hunted with spear and arrow, taking deer when he could, caching for later use what he could not eat. In the coldest month, when every stream and pond was frozen, and even the air smelled like brittle ice, a panther began to shadow Maggot, stealing from his caches.

Gathering up dry bones and vines, Maggot baited a snare near a fresh kill. He waited two nights and part of a third day, while snowfall covered his marks, before the panther came. As it stepped into the noose, Maggot yanked it tight. The panther jumped as the vine closed on its leg, and then took off running from the clatter of bones tied to the other end.

Maggot stood, stiff from waiting, his laughter rolling through the

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snow-laden boughs of the trees. "Did you see that?" he asked aloud, turning, eyes aglitter. "Did you see *that*?"

But there was no one there to see it. As soon as the echo of his voice disappeared in the cold air, he could not even say for sure which language he'd spoken in, that of troll or man. His grin faded. He stood there a moment, staring at the remains of his careful prank — the scar in the snow where the hidden vine snapped up, the tracks of the fleeing panther.

Orphaned as an infant, Maggot had been raised by a troll mother as her own. By the time he became a young man, he was still small and ugly for a troll — not even six-and-a-half feet tall, with thick black hair and pale skin. He'd descended to the lower valleys where humans lived, in search of friends and a mate. What he'd found was war and a woman who wouldn't break the customs of her people to have him.

He turned away from the tripped snare, and left behind the silence of the trees and the trail of the panther.

As he ran through the snow, cold to the bone, he said to himself, in a language of men, "Stupid people. I'm through with them." Then added, in the tongue of trolls, "Stupid trolls. I'm through with them too."

Swift rivers rolled down the eastern slopes of the mountains, forming serpentine paths through rugged highlands. Maggot followed one after another until he came to crashing falls: one plummeted so fast, through such a narrow gorge, it created rushing wind; another several days farther south poured over seven wide drops, ten feet tall apiece, arranged like the steps he'd seen in the buildings of the city of his friend, Bran; a third fell two hundred feet, sending up a mist that captured arcs of color from the sun. Beyond the falls he always encountered signs of men, marks carved in trees and distant wisps of smoke rising into the sky.

Each time he saw those signs, he turned back, until it was spring, when gray skies, gale winds, and cold, steady rains made it impossible for many days in a row to find any game, much less kill it. He took shelter under a dark wing of rock stretched over a ravine filled with churning water. When deer came, they surprised him by coming from the wrong direction — headed downstream — and bounded away before he could string his bow.

Bow in one hand and several arrows in the other, he leapt after them. He splashed knee-deep through swirling icy water, careful not to lose his footing, and gave chase up the far bank.

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One lagged a little behind the others. The clouds cracked open, just enough for Maggot to see its flank flash crimson in the light. He chose that one for his target, without pausing to wonder how it had been wounded.

Knowing the curve and cut of the land, he angled through the trees, over a small hill, and came to the edge of a meadow, nocking an arrow as he went down on one knee. He expected to see the deer crossing the grass, a clear target.

But there were no deer — across the meadow a group of bearded men in buckskin and bright cloth were also hunting. Though they did not wear the braids of knights of the empire, at least one carried a sword on the belt at his waist. They saw Maggot in the same moment he saw them. Arrows leapt from their bows at him.

Releasing his own arrow at the nearest man, Maggot tumbled out of the way and rolled to his feet. The same undergrowth that denied him a clear shot at the deer failed to hide his escape. He wove a twisting path through the hillsides, but wherever he went, his pursuers found him. The rain left too many easy marks, in the mud and leaves, for seasoned trackers to follow. The four men separated into pairs, attempting to herd him this way or that like he was some panicked doe driven by a pack of wolves. They were fools, although he knew that if he paused to mock them they would catch him.

He noticed a pain on the back of his left thigh as he ran — an arrow had torn away a chunk of flesh and his lower leg was slick with blood. It must have happened during the first volley they shot at him, although he hadn't felt it at the time. Just like the wounded deer he'd been trying to shoot.

Having traded position with the deer, Maggot led the hunters on a chase through the dusk, across one morass and another, until he came to a steep bluff beside a stream. He pulled himself hand over hand up one of the vines that dangled from the trees up top. The pursuers took a few wild shots at him when he peered from his new perch. As the sky turned from purple to blue-black, they paused for a brief conference with one another, then relinquished their pursuit and turned back. Finally.

Maggot was tired and irritated. He needed food, and arrows to replace those he had lost. The men who had chased him were the likeliest source of both. So he too reversed his direction, and clambered back down the

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ridge. He cautiously took up their trail and followed them toward their camp.

He favored his injured left leg, and fell behind before he knew their destination. But Maggot, who had decided to leave stupid men behind, was now determined to find them again.

2.

IN THE nocturnal uplands in springtime, strange paths lead to dead-ends in drowned ground or deep thickets of impassable undergrowth. Not even Maggot, who had lived his childhood in darkness with the trolls, could find a clear trail through the marshy hollows along the waterways between the hills.

So, for that reason, he went cautiously, and also in case the men he pursued lay in wait for him as he would have done for them. The gash on his leg throbbed. Everything he liked about this land scant months before — abundance of game and the absence of men — no longer held true. A dagger-toothed lion's roar dropped off the steep mountainsides some miles away, perhaps in similar complaint.

He smelled the camp first — the scent of roasted venison and the sharp stink of wood smoke. Their fire filled a little bowl of land with long flickering shadows, and drew him as certainly as a moth. He would sneak into their camp, filch what he needed or wanted, then continue his trek into the empty mountains west.

Creeping forward, he hid among the trees. Brush had been cleared from the center of the small dell and piled up in a rough wall around the camp. The orange glow of the fire reflected on white bones piled in a midden outside the brush wall. From the clicks of movement and an occasional crunch, he gathered that some small scavengers fed there. He skirted the camp in the opposite direction to avoid any unwelcome chance encounters or alarms. A badger could ruin everything.

Up close, he counted eleven men, mostly seated around the fire, talking loud and vigorously as if they feared nothing in the darkness. Unmoving shapes on the ground could have been sleeping men or packs of some sort.

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Maggot sat down patiently, waiting for them to fall asleep. As soon as he stopped moving, his injured leg began to stiffen.

The group of men rose and went over to one of the shapes lying immobile on the ground, where they began yelling at it and gesturing into the forest. Maggot didn't recognize any of the words. They were wholly unlike any of the three languages — Trollish, Wyndan, or Imperial — that he knew. But the meanings were clear enough, especially once they started kicking the figure. They wanted information, and the man on the ground was unable or unwilling to give it.

Maggot cared only in so far as it either created an opportunity for him to take what he wished or delayed his assault on the camp — until they took splinters of burning wood from the fire. The first coal-red ends of the sticks extinguished themselves in the dark shape of the man's body, and his screams shot like bolts through the dark.

Leaping to his feet, Maggot darted past the edge of the trees before he caught himself. A hatred of fire, used as a weapon, had been deeply ingrained in him by his mother. He cupped his hands and drummed out the troll's "danger, death" warning on his chest.

The torture stopped as all eyes, dark in their sockets, turned his way. He did not know if the men recognized the sound, or its meaning, but the torture stopped.

While a small group of men gathered weapons and ventured in his direction, Maggot darted to the other side of the camp and repeated the sound. Those who dared the darkness at his first cry, came running back into the firelight and, after a brief exchange among themselves, went after him again.

But he had moved to a new position. As soon as the others reached their simple wall of brush, he pounded out the warning tattoo for the third time, adding his voice to it — a bellowing, guttural cry of challenge and defiance. Several arrows whizzed immediately in his direction, but he had already dropped and as soon as they whistled past him, he scuttled off again.

In the brief interval of silence that followed, the dagger-toothed lion roared, this time much closer than before. Maggot found himself between two dangers — the men who'd tried to kill him once already today and a lion who, if she was as hungry as he was, would attempt the same. He

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pulled himself up into the crotch of a giant elm tree. Although immobile, he had a better perch to observe the men and watch for the lion.

He soon realized that his impulsive actions had ruined his chances of sneaking into camp after the warriors were asleep. Between his din and the lion, the men showed no inclination to rest. They paced around the perimeter of their camp, added more fuel to the fire, and seemed to argue over sending scouts into the darkness.

Neither Maggot nor the lion made another sound, and after a time, a few men lay down, then more. But their eyes, those that he could see, stayed wide open. Other men took turns as sentries, sitting by the light and piling wood on the blaze.

The men didn't return to tormenting their victim, however. Maggot was satisfied with that. The air grew colder, the silver clouds fell apart in shreds, and the stars beyond them wheeled across the sky.

Stuck in his tree, Maggot faced a difficult choice. He wanted food and weapons from the camp, he wanted to be far from this vicinity by the time morning arrived, and he wanted to know where the lion was before he started on his way. He was ready to settle for one out of the three, and continue on his way, when the buzz of a snorer told him that the men had started to doze off. He decided to wait. A short while later, the sentry by the fire yawned. He added more logs to the fire, then lifted his hands above his head and stretched his arms.

In a split second, Maggot fitted an arrow to his bow, drew, aimed, and released. The bolt shot in under the guard's left arm and pierced his heart, killing him instantly. Maggot jumped from the crotch of the tree, alighting just as the guard collapsed in a heap on the ground.

In seconds he was inside the camp, though the scab that had formed over the wound on the back of his thigh broke open and started to bleed again. Moving silently, he grabbed a quiver of arrows from the side of one sleeping figure and cut a strip of badly charred venison from the spit beside the fire. He was shoving the blackened meat whole into his mouth when he noticed that one man was not asleep.

The prisoner. He was fair-skinned, like the others, but with lighter hair, maybe blond, maybe gray-white, long and unbraided. He wore nothing, having been stripped of all his clothes and possessions. His ankles were bound together and his arms outspread, staked to the ground.

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There were burn marks on his thighs, his stomach, and his face. Although his mouth was not gagged, he neither shouted out a warning nor made any attempt to ask for assistance.

Maggot stooped, used his knife to quickly saw through the bonds. He did it less to help the man, who meant nothing to him, than to frustrate the hunters who had frightened his game and chased him all that day.

The prisoner didn't care about his motivations. He met Maggot's eyes and smiled, a wry small curling of the lips. He briskly rubbed his feet to restore circulation and then plundered the dead sentry's weapons. Almost a minute had passed and Maggot was eager to be away. He was hacking the last large piece of meat off the spit when there were abrupt sounds of the lion's roar, a scuffle at the bone pile, snarls and a single high-pitched squeal.

One or two of the men jumped up, startled, and on seeing Maggot and the prisoner, shouted, bringing all the others to their feet. Maggot shoved the meat in his teeth, troll fashion, and ran for the forest. One man stood in his way. Maggot dodged to one side, but the man leapt at him, and they grappled briefly until Maggot slashed his arm and he fell back with a shout. Another of the hunters rushed at him and dropped as the prisoner cut him down with the sentry's sword.

The fair-haired man said something, jerking his head as if to give Maggot the lead. But Maggot was already off running, wincing as he leapt the brush pile, fleeing into the darkness beyond the fire and the camp. The other man could follow if he wanted. If he was able.

As the first arrows whipped through the young leaves around them, the former prisoner sprinted forward to catch up. Maggot stretched his legs and ran faster.

3.

NO IMMEDIATE pursuit appeared to follow the last volley, but Maggot was unwilling to rest. Now more than ever, he wanted to cover that distance toward the mountains where he felt sure he could elude any number of pursuers. But he ran on at an uncomfortably slow pace, compared to his normal speed, because of the ache in his leg. Blood flowed from the scab,

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streaking his calf and making his foot slick. He concentrated on ignoring the sharp pain.

A look over his shoulder revealed the prisoner at his heels. He carried the scabbard and sword in one hand, and a small bag in the other, pumping his arms to keep up.

Once they reached the ridgetops, passing from one to the next, they slowed again to avoid tumbling into the marshy bottom lands between the hills. They paused on one tree-covered slope to consider the alternatives, but the deep shadows and unfamiliar terrain made it difficult to choose any certain trail. Maggot studied the sky through the immature canopy. The moon had set earlier, but from the position of the stars and the smell of the wind, he judged that they were heading in a southerly direction and so he sought out the more westerly path. But the prisoner had studied the sky also, and had his own sense of direction. He said something to Maggot, and pointed out a track that would take them farther south.

When Maggot turned to answer, the other man pointed at Maggot's mouth. His lips curled into that small smile again before cracking into open laughter.

Maggot's hand leapt to his lips — he'd forgotten the meat clenched tight between his jaws. He took it in his hand and laughed also, a deep, resonant laugh that made his shoulders shake before he stifled it in case there were pursuers. Remembering his manners, he offered it to the other man out of reflex. "It's ruined with burning," he apologized in the language of the empire, because this man reminded him more of his friend Bran. "But it fills the belly."

The man's eyes narrowed, but he grinned as he accepted it. He tore it in half and gave the larger half back, much to Maggot's relief as he quickly shoved the meat into his own mouth. They both chewed for a moment in silence. Maggot thought about how he hadn't laughed in months, except for the joke he played on the hunting cat. He thought about trying to explain that incident.

Before he could speak, the stranger said something Maggot didn't understand — not a word sounded familiar — and once again pointed to the more southerly of the two trails.

Maggot had intended to go on alone into the far reaches of the

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mountains. But it was better that they keep moving, and either direction would take them farther from the group of hunters. Maggot gestured for him to lead on.

While he did not run, as Maggot had, he had long, rapid strides that carried them quickly down the wooded slope to a stream where they paused to sip. Water was plentiful, so there was no need to drink until their bellies swelled and slowed them down. Maggot's estimation of his companion rose in measure to his moderation.

The other man looked at Maggot, then touched one finger to his chest. "Ehren," he repeated several times. The words rolled off his tongue with a strangely liquid sound to them.

Maggot understood at once. He sorted through all the names he'd been given among people, and answered instead with the name his troll mother had always called him, the oldest name he knew for himself. "Maggot," he said, tapping his own chest.

The other man nodded, and spouted a rapid flow of words as if perfect communication had been established. Finally, out of reflex and frustration, Maggot made a bitter face, sticking out his tongue. It was the way he'd learned to say no and *stop.*

Ehren's mouth dropped open in midproclamation and he laughed again, shaking his head. Maggot responded in kind.

It was very good to laugh again.

Standing up, Ehren led them south. When the sun rose on their left, they had traveled nearly two leagues across difficult wilderness. Maggot felt satisfied that they were safe from the hunters and would have carried on at a more leisurely pace later in the day after resting. But Ehren was avid to push on. His burns looked raw in the dawn.

"Where are we rushing to?" Maggot asked in the language of the empire, not expecting any answer, at least none he could comprehend. His leg ached and he wanted rest. "Let's find a nice cool place to sleep."

Ehren glanced at Maggot, but would not pause, and he did not even glance back when Maggot repeated the question in the language of the mountain people. Maggot was growing irritated, but he decided to go on. He liked Ehren, because they had laughed together.

Several times they spied game in the forest, small rodents that evaded them quickly. Near midday, they spotted a herd of the wood bison grazing

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in the forest. Maggot preferred their meat to venison when he could get it. The tongues were especially tasty.

Indicating Maggot's bow, Ehren directed Maggot to shoot one or offered to do it instead. Maggot tapped his own chest, indicating his preference. Ehren nodded acceptance and began creeping toward the game. Maggot grabbed his shoulder and stopped him. He wrinkled his nose, making a slight sniffing sound, then made a follow-me motion and led Ehren downwind. He shifted his weight as he walked, to ease the injured leg. Bison had terrible eyesight, but their sense of smell was as strong as a troll's. The slightest whiff of something unusual could send them into a panic. Even a breeze too light to stir the leaves could carry a human scent.

Maggot counted seven animals in all — a bull, three cows, and three calves. They grazed in a meadow about a hundred feet away. Maggot crept out from the trees, chose the nearer calf, and sunk a feathered shaft into its side.

The animal bleated in terror, as the other bison lowed and bolted. Not knowing which direction danger came from, they stampeded in Maggot's direction, leaving the wailing calf behind spiraling in a wounded circle as it fell. The cows and surviving calves veered off into the forest. But the bull, whether by chance or some vagary of the wind, focused his red eyes right on Maggot's position. He lowered his heavy horned head, squared the great hump of his shoulders, and charged.

Maggot meant to dash to the nearest tree, but his injured leg tightened at the sharp movement and the bull was on him. Dropping his bow, Maggot braced himself and grabbed the short, sharp horns in either hand. The impact tossed him backward, but he jumped with it, landing again on his feet, still clinging to the horns.

The bull bellowed, shrugging its massive shoulders, lifting Maggot again. This time when he landed, he twisted the head immediately, attempting to drive the beast into the ground. It reacted in confusion and panic, trying to pull away, but Maggot screamed and wrenched the neck with all the strength he'd earned by wrestling trolls much larger than himself. As the bull's front legs buckled beneath it, Maggot prepared to let go and run for the trees. But Ehren rushed forward and thrust his sword through its throat. The great animal grunted, tried to heave itself up, and collapsed.

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Maggot stood there panting heavily. He would not have killed it, knowing the cows and calves were now unprotected. When he looked up at Ehren, the other man was grinning, running his fingertip along the wet broad side of the sword, and licking the blood from it. He saw Maggot watching and wiggled his eyebrows humorously.

Across the meadow, the stricken calf gave out a few depleted bleats. Limping more than he cared to think about, Maggot went over to the poor creature. Its tongue lolled out of its mouth, and its back legs kicked futilely without budging its body. Drawing his knife, Maggot dispatched the calf quickly.

They gutted the smaller animal, and Maggot would have been happy enough to eat it raw. When Ehren balked at this, Maggot drew forth his flint and steel. They could dare a small fire, and Ehren gathered branches of a type that produced very little smoke, which thinned and dissipated before it passed the treetops. The flesh was still pink, and running with juices when they ate, which was well enough for Maggot.

He examined his injured leg more closely when they were done. The tear in the muscle was the size of a nut. The pain did not bother him as much as the other consequences. It needed time to heal, but instead he kept straining it.

Based on the tone of his voice, Ehren was asking Maggot questions. Maggot walked away. A small stream trickled through the lower end of the meadow. He drank from it, then cleaned the wound and bound it with a strip of cloth cut from the hem of his breechcloth. Ehren joined him.

"We should find a hidden place and sleep while the day lasts," Maggot said in the language of the empire, and then the mountain people. He was exhausted. "We'll continue tonight, after dark."

Ehren shook his head and spoke vigorously, peaking his hands, and making dropping motions. Maggot gathered after a while that he was describing the land he came from, somewhere in the south in the shelter of the mountain ranges. He soon understood the words for mountain, and Ehren's description of a waterfall.

"A *mountain* and a *waterfall*," Maggot said, using Ehren's words. He laughed, but this time it was not such a happy sound. "This land is nothing but *mountain* and *waterfall*."

Ehren began explaining all over again, pointing to the east.

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"Enough," Maggot said, cutting him off with a sharp turn of his shoulder. "I'm tired, and I hurt, and I want to rest before nightfall. Let us wrap what meat we can carry in the skins we cut, and find some hole or hidden place where we can sleep before other scavengers arrive."

He pointed to the buzzards circling in the sky above the meadow. Ehren comprehended well enough that he gathered their store of food.

When he saw Maggot limping, he offered an arm to help him along. Maggot refused. He had no intentions of going any farther than a decent resting place. When they came to a tumbled outcrop of rock that offered some minimal shelter, Maggot lay down, shoving his bundle under a ledge of stone, then scooting in beside it.

Ehren had dark circles under his eyes as well, made worse by the burn marks on his cheeks. He became angry, indicating that they should go on while there was still daylight.

"You can go wherever you like," Maggot said. "But I'm going to sleep." And that was exactly what he did, burrowing his head into his arm, closing his eyes. He was sleeping when he felt a footstep nearby. Instantly he rolled to his feet, alert, defensive, knife drawn and ready to strike.

But it was only Ehren, who took a step back. It was several hours later. He held his bag in one hand, and it appeared heavier. There was mud on his fingers, and the sword in his fist.

"You should not startle me," Maggot said, and Ehren nodded at the sound of his voice, then quickly indicated that he was lying down to sleep. "Very smart," Maggot said, and when the other man was still, he settled down again himself.

He slept dreamlessly, awakening as easily as he'd fallen asleep. When he saw Ehren on the ground near him, he was glad. He'd started to like the man. He thought about his two friends — Sinnglas, one of the mountain people he had rescued from a flood, and Bran, a knight he'd rescued from Sinnglas. Maybe that's how it would be for him, he thought. He would rescue people, and they would become his friends.

Dawn brightened the eastern sky, promising another clear day. For trolls, dawn signaled death, an end to the safety of darkness. Maggot knew that people saw it differently, looked on dawn as a beginning. He looked at it hopefully.

And saw smoke on the horizon.

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It had to be the hunters, and no more than a mile or so away. Perhaps as close as the meadow where he and Ehren had slain the bison.

He shook his companion awake. Ehren jerked upright, and Maggot pointed out the cord of smoke.

"They've followed us," he said. "And they do not even care to hide themselves."

Ehren nodded, as if he had expected exactly this. In seconds they gathered their simple belongings and resumed their journey. Maggot willed his leg to work as it always did, ignoring the pain and refusing to favor it. While the birds were yet singing the morning in, they made their path across the hills until they came to a river.

Ehren led them upstream, seeking a good spot to cross. Maggot mistrusted the river — branches rushed by, the water seeming to flow both deep and fast.

Finally they reached a place where the river widened out. Large rocks protruding above the surface promised a path across. Ehren removed his belt and, holding his sword above his head, started wading instantly toward the other shore. The water lapped at his calves, and came up as high as his waist before growing shallow again.

Maggot followed after him, step by step, but Ehren quickly reached the other bank, and stood there, gesturing Maggot this way and then the other, trying to keep him to the path.

The icy river swirled around Maggot's legs, numbingly cold and as powerful as the wind in a storm. He had reached midstream, the water tugging at him like the hand of a giant, when his injured leg stiffened. Looking up, Ehren gestured both hands frantically to the left. Maggot took one step that way and missed his footing, so that he started sliding down into deeper water and could not stop the motion before his head plunged under.

The current wrapped him in a tight embrace and dragged him away.

4.

Maggot tumbled, twisted, and bobbed to the surface, gasping for air, so far downstream that Ehren was only a tiny figure in the far distance for one blurred glimpse before the water swirled him under again. This time

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he tossed, unable to find his way up, until his lungs nearly burst. When his face felt open air, he opened his mouth and drank in all he could breathe and more water than he needed to swallow.

The buffeting water had torn the bundle of meat from him, but his quiver and bow were still slung over his shoulder. With his hands free, he paddled toward the far shore, intending to rejoin his new friend.

His attempt to swim kept his nose above water, but not much more as the water rushed him along. Realizing he could make no headway, he turned his attention to the dangers he hastened toward. Although he didn't know what waited below, he'd seen enough rivers to expect falls and rocks somewhere soon.

It was as if thinking made it so. The trees on the shore slid by faster than a deer could run. The land began to drop around him and the river roared more quickly, constantly tugging him under again. White spray leapt off boulders ahead, fanning rainbows against the sunny sky. Just before the boulders, storm-washed debris had piled up on a slight bend. Maggot wrestled against the current, winning the contest to come close enough to reach for a tree lodged there. He caught a protruding branch with one hand and pulled himself up with the other.

The sudden addition of his weight and momentum tore the log free. It swiftly unhinged from the bank and then went downstream with Maggot clinging to it.

The tree absorbed much of the impact as he bounced from one boulder to the next, lifting him up out of the whitewater for a moment, and then smashing him into it again. Above the roar of the rapids and his own groans at each shuddering blow, he heard the distant thunder of a waterfall.

Just as he was ready to take his chances by grasping at a boulder, the tree lodged between two larger rocks. Gasping for air, Maggot leveraged himself atop it. He had his weight balanced on one knee when the tree rolled, slipped loose, and slammed into another ledge of stone, throwing him free.

Empty water surrounded him; beyond the water were high walls of stone and a noise as solid as a wall as he rushed through it. He flailed, clutching for any handhold, twisting, water pounding into his nose, his throat, gagging him, his eyes blinded, until he did the only thing left to do

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— he rolled into a ball, his hands covering his head, elbows covering his face.

For a half-heartbeat he flew out of the water and a breeze raked needles across his bare skin. He opened his mouth, choking out water, gulping down air.

And slammed into water and rock that knocked all the air out of him again. At first he thought he was falling still, but then realized he was sliding, his body shooting down an angled groove cut by the river in the naked mountain stone. Sixty feet or more went by in a second, ripping the bandage off his leg and the quiver from his back and snapping the bow slung over his shoulder. He tensed for the impact at the bottom.

Instead he splashed into a deep pool. His feet touched bottom, pushing him up, and his head broke water, arms paddling away from the spray and thunder of the falls. He stretched out his legs when he started to sink and found he could stand and breathe. Though his legs shook like tallgrass in the wind, he staggered toward the shore.

He collapsed as soon as he made his way up the bank. Rolled over on his back. Pushed himself upright on his elbows with his head tilted back, grateful to be breathing.

Beyond the pool, the river carved a wider, tranquil course through towering hardwoods. When he looked back at the height of the cliff, and the peculiar shape of the falls, which were grooved at an angle out of one solid seam of rock, he knew he'd been lucky. He even thought he might come back and slide down them again for fun sometime. It wouldn't be so bad — if he skipped the rapids before the chute.

The pieces of his bow floated in the pool. Forcing himself to stand, he ventured out to recover them if only for the bowstring, which he'd find hard to replace. In the jumble of water below the slide, he also found the quiver, still tightly tied shut although the shoulder strap was missing. Even if the arrows inside were ruined, he still had the steel arrowheads. He could make and fletch new shafts if he needed to, the way Sinnglas and his brothers had taught him. His flint and steel were safe in the bottom of the quiver, and he was glad to have those too. His knife was lost, the cord torn from his neck with enough force to tear the skin, though he couldn't have said when that happened; he searched some time without finding it.

As he climbed from the pool with both his prizes, the bowstring and

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arrows, he began to shiver, his skin goosepimpling. Tucking the quiver under his arm, he sought a trail up the cliff. He had to claw for purchase with his hands and his feet.

Halfway up, he realized he needed to be on the other side or he would have to cross again at the ford above. Aloud, he mumbled, "Stupid Maggot."

So he descended to the pool again and swam across. It took all his strength to keep his head above the water.

Attempting the slope on the other side, he heard a voice, not from upstream, where Ehren might be searching for him, but lower on the river. There were several voices — men talking quietly — though no one was visible through the trees.

Without a single decent weapon at hand, Maggot hurried to the top and sought someplace to conceal himself. He considered climbing into a tree, since men seldom looked up as often or as carefully as they should. But his limbs still trembled with the cold, so he chose a crevice in the rocks along the riverbank. After squeezing down into it, he grabbed several fallen branches and dragged them in front of his hiding spot, hoping it would be sufficient.

Just as he yanked the last branch into place, a shout came from below. His tracks. He'd left them all around the pool.

Several long moments later, the first of the bearded hunters appeared across the river at the top of the cliff. Maggot could not tell if they were the same men who'd captured Ehren, or another group, although they were dressed similarly. The hunter looked for trails upstream, having mistaken Maggot's false start for his true path.

Then he stopped, and stared straight across the water at the spot where Maggot had hidden.

Maggot's skin itched all over. It might be better to take his chances being seen as he ran away from shore rather than get pinned in one spot while they shot arrows at him. He was braced to toss the brush away and pull himself out of his hiding spot, when he heard hard-soled boots scuffing across the stones directly above his head.

The hunter across the stream stood with one hand on the hilt of his sword. The two men exchanged a brief argument. Maggot saw only half of it, and understood none of what he heard, but it wasn't too difficult to

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guess what the debate concerned. Above him, the hunter shuffled one of his boots on the stone. The man across the stream shouted angrily, until he grew red in the face, jabbing his finger upstream.

Other men appeared on the far cliff, gathering around the leader until there were nine in all. The sun glinted off golden rings hanging from some of their ears.

The boots above him jumped from one stone to another, then fell silent. The leader on the other side waved his hand upstream, and the whole throng continued up the riverbank.

If Ehren followed Maggot downstream he was going to blunder right into the men he had so recently escaped. There were some on both sides of the river, though possibly fewer on this side, maybe only one. Maggot was glad, because that might give him a better chance.

The sun inched its way toward noon. Maggot, by a lifetime of habit accustomed to patience and moving at night, closed his eyes and rested before he set out to follow them and find Ehren again. He thought it better to wait than to stumble on them from behind, in broad daylight with no bow or blade. But the longer he waited, the more his shaking worsened, until even his teeth chattered.

He suspected the rocks, for holding damp and cold. Easing the branches away, he emerged from the shaded crack. But even the bright sun failed to warm his skin and stop his shivering. He followed the trail along the riverbank, limping without pretense, hoping that movement would drive away his chill.

All the aches and injuries had a wonderful concentrating effect, marshaling reserves of will to fight the periodic flushes of pain and to attack the path ahead of him. Still, by the time he reached the ford where he'd fallen in, the fever had fastened on him. He knew the symptoms too well.

Drinking as much water as his belly could hold, he sought a place to lie up until dark. He found an old tree, a mere husk, ten feet around at the base and completely hollow. He could just barely squeeze his broad shoulders through the crack. Brushing aside the forgotten hoard of some squirrel or other rodent, he cached his own meager possessions within. Then twisting inside, he curled his body up on the dirt floor, pulled the moldy leaves over himself for a blanket, and tried to rest.

Like the safety of night itself, rest seemed destined never to arrive.

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In time he dozed, and while dozing, dreamed. But they were fever dreams, the voices of strangers calling out his name. He had the sense of something small gnawing at him, at his joints and flesh, especially his arrow-injured leg, devouring him in little pieces. A million tiny fingers tapped and scraped on the walls of his cave. He wondered where his mother was, and why she didn't bring him something to eat or warm him with her body.

When he opened his eyes, everything was dark under a drizzle of rain. A small, furry beast with red eyes and foul breath snapped at him through the crack in the cave, but he drove it back with a handful of arrows. As he jabbed at it, it split into two beasts, then four. He realized that these were the fever beasts, devouring him from the inside out, and he fought harder. The voices became those of other trolls, mocking him for being so small and weak and helpless.

At some time it ended and he fell, like a drop of rain, out of his nightmares and back into the deep water of sleep.

He woke clutching the arrows. His long black hair lay in tangles over his face. A musty, moldy odor filled the air. He didn't feel rested at all, but that didn't surprise him. Almost no time had passed; the sun was still in the sky. Then he realized it was the morning sun, and the sky overcast with new clouds. He'd lost at least a day of time.

Yet the fever had broken. He was filthy and his throat was parched, so he went down to the river's edge. After drinking with the caution of a hunted animal, he cleaned himself. The wound on his left leg was red and swollen. He winced when he touched it — the skin broke and pus flowed out. Gritting his teeth so he would not wince again, he cleaned it as well as he could, scraping it out with one of the arrowheads until all the skin and muscle looked freshly raw.

He'd lost too much time. He had no idea where Ehren was, or if he had escaped the men who pursued him. He hoped his new friend was safe. He searched the riverbank, but the rain had erased their tracks. Maggot could find nothing to tell him where the men had gone, or what path they'd taken. He had nothing more to go on than Ehren's description of a mountain and a waterfall, which could be anyplace at all between where he was and the populated lands to the east.

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He couldn't find Ehren. He couldn't help him either, not against all those hunters, as injured and hungry as he was.

"Good luck to you, my friend," he said softly, in the language of the empire.

Then he turned west to avoid all men while he recovered. He became like a troll again, scavenging for things to eat as he traveled. One night became another, filled entirely with moving on and seeking food. He ate mushrooms, those he recognized, and chewed on acorns he found and a few scattered nuts. On the second day, he spied a snake lazing in the sun upon a rock, killed it when it bit into his hand as he grabbed it, and ate it raw. On the fourth, using the arrows as small spears, he waited for hours in the cold water of a marsh to kill a muskrat emerging from its den. It was enough to sustain him.

Without knife or bow, unable to run at his full speed, he found the game he would have preferred had nothing to fear from him. He saw deer, and once he came upon a herd of the flatback mammuts gouging mudholes in the soft earth with their long straight tusks. Every day he advanced toward the mountains, far away from the settled lands below, until he reached the first line of peaks. He climbed the highest ridge, and saw beyond them another set of mountains.

And down in the valley below, pale blue among the wild green, the shapes of buildings.

5.

THE CITY LAY some miles away, but the sharp glare of the afternoon sun revealed it clearly. A distinctly square mountain rose in regular steps, surrounded by other geometric peaks. Here and there, through breaks in the canopy, Maggot saw a continuous line snaking around the perimeter of the buildings. So it was a walled city. Bits of bluish white flashed through the enveloping trees, enough to give the impression of a vast settlement.

Maggot scratched his head and sniffed the air, curiously.

The band of trolls he belonged to with his mother had lived in caves that stretched miles beneath the earth. When he first left his mother and

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went down into the valleys, he lived with Sinnglas's people, who had only the simplest of structures, long narrow bowers of bent wood hooded with braided mats or sheets of bark: very cavelike buildings, and comfortable to him. After he met Bran, the two of them journeyed down to the empire's outpost in the northern mountains. That city had been built of stone, mimicking the mountains. Just like the city below. He and Bran had been beaten, chased, and locked into a storeroom. Maggot had not cared for his experience there.

He almost turned and walked away. If his body ached less, took less will to put in motion, perhaps he would have. He thought that there was something wrong here, a lack of movement, of smoke, of other signs of people. Then he saw a flash of bluish light near one of the structures, and an answering light across the city.

If he investigated the outskirts below, he might be able to scavenge new weapons for himself — a knife at least, perhaps a bow. Perhaps find something to eat that he needn't hunt first. Ignoring his misgivings, he headed into the valley.

By this time the sun rested low in the sky, spreading butterfly wings of scarlet and gold above the long shadows cast by the valley's western range. His path had carried him onto a finger of ridge that looked over a winding river on one side and the city on the other. The city was more difficult to see at this lower elevation. Some of the trees were fifteen and twenty feet in diameter, great poplars reaching up like columns that supported the sky.

He found a trail, a deer trail but a trail, that switchbacked through the trees down the cityside of the ridge. Following it, he passed piles of little round pellets — scat — all cold. Farther on, in a narrow place along a steep incline where the trail was worn down to bare dirt, he saw fresh tracks. They were hard to make out in the dusk, so he bent down on his hands and knees. Some of the tracks were five fingers wide — elk, too big for him to take down bare-handed. But mixed among them were smaller prints, three fingers or so. Likely enough, white-tailed deer. He took out an arrow and carried it like a knife in case he was lucky enough to encounter one.

At that very moment, an inhuman scream rose through the trees like a startled bird. Maggot froze, hunkering down. It came from the city, a loud cry that intensified into thunder and ended in a long, low fading rumble.

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The arrow in his hand felt like a pitiful, inadequate weapon. When the sound stopped, it left behind silence. Maggot stared intently in the direction of the cry, but the darkness of the valley stretched out unbroken before him. He scarcely dared to breathe. One moment passed, and another. Far off, a bird cried *whip-poor-will, whip-poor-will.*

As he slowly straightened to his feet, there was a rustle on the slope behind him and a slashing fountain of pain as something hit him in the back.

The quiver smashed into the nape of his neck and he soared off the trail, tumbling head over heel into brush fifteen or twenty feet below. The branches of the small trees tore at his skin but broke his fall. He dangled upside down for a second, then disentangled his legs and dropped to the ground. When he rolled over, he saw, up on the trail where he'd been standing, a pair of eyes shine greenish gold in the darkness.

A panther. Returning favor for the trick that Maggot had played on its brother. It too must have been stalking the deer. Until it found other prey.

Maggot stumbled to his feet, shouting a wordless challenge at it. He'd lost the arrow, and considered grabbing another from the quiver as he stared up into the panther's eyes and tried not to blink. He was off-balance on the steep hillside, so he took a step backward for better footing.

The panther slid over the lip of the trail, slinking low and fast through the underbrush. Maggot took another step backward and the panther leapt, a tawny blur bursting out of the darkness.

Maggot thrust out a hand to catch it by the throat, but its momentum sent them both somersaulting down the hillside to a level spot. They briefly rolled free of one another and then the panther pounced at his head. This time Maggot met it straight on, springing back at it. As the two of them crashed together, he caught a handful of the fur on its face. The two stood toe to toe, Maggot batting away one paw while he thrust his thumbnail into its golden eye. The cat snarled, swinging its head so violently his thumb slipped loose without doing any damage. When it jumped in an attempt to disembowel him with its hind feet, Maggot thrust it away, leaping back from its claws, and they both fell apart again.

Even this close, the cat was little more than a dark shadow crouching among the vague shapes of bushes. The moon had risen early and was

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hidden behind the rim of the giant trees. Maggot would have liked more light, anything to give him an advantage.

He stared at the panther, and pounded on his chest with cupped hands, beating out the troll's challenge. "Go away," he yelled. His voice was hoarse from screaming.

For an answer, the panther emitted a low rippling growl and padded forward. As it jumped again, Maggot grabbed a wind-blown branch from the ground and swung at the panther's head. The log cracked over its skull, breaking its stride but no more.

The panther shrugged off the effects and stood staring at Maggot from only a few feet away. This was the biggest panther he'd ever seen, more than match for him.

"Run," Maggot screamed at it, raising the shortened stick to strike another blow. "Run before I kill you!"

The panther crouched, as if to pounce. Then it laid back its ears and hissed at Maggot, opening its mouth, showing all of its teeth. All it had to do was fasten one bite —

"Run away!" he screamed at the animal, stepping toward it and swinging his rude club.

His blow whiffed empty air, as the panther turned and disappeared into night.

Still tightly gripping the branch, Maggot watched it depart and slowly walked the other direction. With his free hand he felt the back of his neck, where the crushed quiver had absorbed the panther's first, and otherwise fatal, bite. His other wounds bled and burned, but were not the worst that he'd ever received. They'd heal in time. So long as he was not attacked again.

He moved from trunk to trunk to take advantage of shelter. He would be safe in the city, at least from the panther. By his estimate, he ought to be nearly on top of buildings by now, but he saw no fires, heard no voices, no barking dogs, nothing.

The ground under his feet became rocky, uneven. As he kept a lookout for the panther, a stone shifted beneath his foot and he stumbled. Regaining his balance, he saw around him the remains of a ruined wall. The stone was cold, and perfectly smooth to his touch, a white color veined and clouded with shades of blue. It almost glowed in the dark,

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where it thrust through the vegetation that buried it. He pulled aside some vines that snapped as they parted. The top layer of stone revealed the sinuous, continuous form of a carved snake.

He spun around. He was inside the city but the city was abandoned.

The moon shed pale light over the landscape. Fewer trees grew within the circuit of the broken wall. Off to his left lay a long low building. Directly ahead, the manmade mountain rose into the night sky, its squarish bulk rising to a flat top outlined against the stars. Vines and shrubs flooded around the base of it, as if trying to pull it under the surface of the forest to drown. Other mounds surrounded it, too difficult to count in the night. Some appeared blockish, as if made of stone, while others were rounded. Ranged between Maggot and the great, squat tower, was a broad plaza with some sort of low mound in the center. Surrounding it, he saw the silent shadows of a herd of deer. He could just make out the new sets of antlers on the bucks.

Without forgetting the panther behind him, Maggot began to creep toward the deer. A group of four animals grazed slightly apart from the rest. One was a fawn, a tiny thing, and one of the other does was swollen. She must have been almost ready to deliver; she could hardly walk. Pulling another arrow from his quiver, Maggot chose them for his prey. He'd try to separate the fawn, or run down the pregnant doe.

He darted from a pile of rubble to a hiding place behind a tree, angling to get between them and the main group. Almost as an afterthought, he looked up.

All the new, tender young leaves were stripped from the branches, maybe as high as twenty feet — it was hard to tell. Not a single branch of the tree was spared. The trunk itself was split open, and the heartwood chewed out like pith from a stem of grass. This must have been done by whatever animal made the frightening scream earlier.

Maggot straightened, stepped away from the tree. The little group of deer jerked their heads up. One of them emitted a high-pitched whistle and ran toward the safety of the larger group.

As he turned his attention away from possible danger to his present hunger, he saw a low rectangular pool in the center of the plaza. Water trickled from animal-shaped fountains carved in a wall at one end. The deer gathered on the far side on this pool, around a tufted mound of earth.

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While he watched, the mound of earth stood up and moved.

Shaped like a bear, but more than twice a bear's size, it walked slothfully, but intentionally, in his direction, trailed by a small but visible cloud of buzzing insects that stirred the air as it moved. A vast stench rose from the beast. Maggot's empty stomach clenched and he retched.

The creature stood up on its hind legs and staggered toward the noise to investigate. The thing was twenty feet tall, front paws tipped with claws the size of sabers. It started its weird keening, the same blood-curdling cry it had voiced earlier.

Maggot did the only sensible thing. He turned and ran.

He'd not taken ten strides toward the outer wall when he saw something that made him come to a complete stop.

Ehren. Dressed in the clothes of the hunters. And he had a bow and arrow aimed at Maggot as if he meant to shoot him.

6.

EHREN'S GAZE twitched toward the renewed keening of the weird creature, giving Maggot a chance to dodge aside as the arrow was released. It whizzed past him.

Before taking another shot, Ehren spun and dashed for the nearest building.

Maggot raced after him. It could be no coincidence that he was also here in this abandoned city, and Maggot wanted to find out why. Besides, he ran away from the shaggy giant, and that was the same direction Maggot headed. The stone buildings promised some shelter impassable to the beast's great bulk.

The animal's scream wavered in the air, and plummeted through the scale to its low-pitched reverberating boom. His front paws thudded into the ground, and his weight thumped after Maggot while the scream echoed off the stone structures. For a second, he mistook the echo off the wall ahead as an answering cry and his skin crawled.

Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw the creature stop its chase. In that moment he lost sight of Ehren.

The building ahead was long, straight, and narrow, and open along the

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side facing Maggot. A row of columns, more than a troll could ever count, supported the roof on the open side; below them a continuous row of wide, shallow steps went down from the platform into a grassy area thick with trees. The building stretched off into the shadows beyond the edge of the plaza, to an area surrounded by smaller mounds.

Maggot dodged behind a tree, in case Ehren meant to shoot him again. Slowly he peered out again. The evenly spaced columns on the building might have seemed impressively thick and tall until one compared them with the randomly scattered trees. The combined effect was bewildering. The city had been empty for centuries.

Moving from tree to tree, up the steps, to a column, Maggot neither saw nor heard — nor, wrinkling his nose reflexively like a troll, smelled — any sign of Ehren.

He moved cautiously along the building, aware again of the fresh aches in his body overlying the old. He wondered why Ehren had tried to shoot him. Had it been a mistake? Did he mean to shoot the beast instead? Why, when he needed food and rest, could he find neither?

In a section of the building where the roof had caved in, crushed by falling trees or weakened where columns had tipped beneath some shifting weight, in the shadows beside the rubble, Maggot paused. He wanted Ehren.

Sometimes the best way to flush a prey was to remain still. Maggot quietly mounted a pile of debris sheltered by a more intact piece of overhanging roof, and then he sat there, wrapped in deep nocturnal shadow.

He could see in all three directions — down the row of columns in the undamaged length of the building ahead, out across the grove of trees across the plaza, and over the jumbled piles of stone behind him. His fingers plied in the dirt of leaf mold covering the stones, smearing it across his face to reduce the shine from his eyes. His huge right hand rested on the rock he intended to use as a weapon.

And he waited.

A few birds called out. One of the deer made a barking sound. The half-circle of the moon floated silently in the sky and the stars formed a luminous river. A little blood trickled from a broken scab on his back where the panther had cut him. One drop rolled slowly down his spine,

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followed by another, both of them pooling, cool, around the cloth at his waist.

He did not move even his head, but looked only out of the corners of his eyes.

A vague shape detached itself from one of the trees, looking in the direction of the pool, and paused. The twisted shadows concealed its silhouette. Maggot held his throw. The shadow moved on — only another of the deer.

From the direction he'd come, there was a clatter of gravel and a thud as some piece of fallen masonry shifted and resettled. He remained motionless, tensed to spring.

The stillness extended until it seemed to grow as long as the building. He relaxed, only to find his muscles, especially in his wounded left leg, too sore to loosen completely. Maggot reluctantly admitted to himself that Ehren had kept moving. But how had he tracked Maggot this far, and why? It was opposite the direction he'd said he was going.

As he squatted there, thinking about all of it — the panther attack, that weird beast protecting the plaza, and now Ehren, his legs began to tremble. He released an audible breath and stilled them. He really had no idea how badly the big cat had hurt him; he'd had no time to examine himself. But his face, and neck, and shoulders felt covered with blood. He needed food, water, someplace to hide and recover his strength.

A small stone careened off the wall beyond the rows of undisturbed columns, and pattered to a stop somewhere on the marble platform below Maggot's perch.

Ehren, after all.

A feint to make him move.

Maggot gripped the rock with his right hand and waited. He peered down the long corridor between the columns. Still crouching low, he shifted the rock for a better grip.

Ehren skulked toward him then, sprinting from column to column and peering beyond them out into the darkness away from Maggot, until he'd come within thirty feet.

Maggot slowly hefted the stone to throw it. He would use it as a hammer if the other man came close enough. One more column would do it, but before Ehren took that step, he drew something from the pouch at

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his waist, the one he'd taken from the camp. He lifted it toward the plaza, and whispered a few unintelligible words.

A small flash of cold blue light, like the one he'd seen from the hillside.

An answering flash, from within the pyramid, muted, but from a much larger source, reflecting from a hole.

Maggot's slight gasp must have startled the other man too. Ehren staggered backward from the pillar and stared straight up the mound of debris at Maggot's hiding place.

With a shout, Maggot pounced, leap landing into dash as he swung at the other man's skull. Ehren lurched sideways, but the stone glanced off his head and sent him crashing to the floor. Maggot hit the ground, losing his weapon on impact, but rolled to his feet ready to fight.

As Ehren lay stunned, Maggot rose to his full height, drumming the "danger, death" tattoo of the trolls on his bare chest.

A second later, the echo of it returned from the direction of the pyramid across the plaza. The shape of the building altered the sound.

With a bow and knife Maggot would have no problem finding game. He bent to strip Ehren's still form of his weapons. As soon as his hands touched the knife belt, Ehren's hands shot up to grasp his wrists. Maggot pulled away, but Ehren kicked him, sent him sprawling.

Instead of drawing his weapon to attack Maggot, he searched the floor to snatch up something he'd dropped — the shining stone. He found it as Maggot staggered to his feet. Ehren did not stay to fight, but ran away, sprinting through the screen of trees toward the pyramid.

Maggot pursued him, wondering why a man would chase him so far only to flee. Ehren was fleet, at fast as Maggot, and not so weakened by recent injuries. He stretched out the distance between them, drawing his sword as he ran.

They dodged between the mounds, avoiding the pool, the deer, and their strange guardian. Ehren ducked behind the few ancient trees, but Maggot stayed after him. He tripped as he tried to leap a fallen tulip poplar, a tree so large it uprooted a corner of the base of the pyramid when it fell.

Maggot grunted as he hit the ground and rolled back to his feet. Ehren ascended the pyramid, up one of the flights of narrow, flat steps cut into

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each side of the structure, flanked by stylized creatures carved from stone. He turned and pointed his sword at Maggot.

"Go away, before I must kill you!" Ehren said. The accent was thick, but the words the language of the empire, the language that Maggot had spoken to him. Why had he pretended not to know it? Had he understood all along?

"You were my friend!" Maggot said. He was angry beyond understanding. He wanted to smash Ehren, to crush him.

"The Jewel is within my reach and once I have it — "

Maggot roared and jumped for the corner platform, pulling himself up onto the first level of the structure. He had no clear intention other than getting higher than Ehren. He leapt, gripping the lip of the next ledge, and hoisted himself up. As soon as his knee scraped over the edge of the stone he rushed to the next flat wall and did the same.

Ehren stumbled up the narrow steps, peering over the shoulders of the stone guardians, yelling in some incomprehensible tongue.

When Maggot reached the fifth platform, his shoulders aching, he rounded the corner of the building, out of Ehren's line of vision, and vaulted the figures lining the stairs. Taking three steps in a stride, slipping, then two, still favoring his bad leg, he sprung to the broad flat top of the structure and met Ehren as he reached the peak.

Maggot tackled him, catching his wrist and slamming it against the stone altar that occupied the middle of the platform. Sword clanged on marble, ringing as it skittered loose. But the other man clutched Maggot tightly as the two rolled to the edge and fell off.

They tumbled through the air, Ehren landing on top as they hit the level below. Maggot grunted, losing his grip, and the other man reeled free.

As Ehren scrambled up the steps, Maggot grabbed his heel and yanked. Both men toppled backward, falling apart. Maggot smacked his left elbow on a corner of stone, hitting the bone that made his arm go tingly and numb. Ehren rolled past Maggot and cracked his head, crying out. He sat up clutching one hand to his temple. When he looked up at Maggot, his eyes went wide with fright and he started slipping feet first down the stairs.

Maggot rose, cradling his elbow and grimacing as the throbbing subsided. He followed a step or two after Ehren, not understanding the

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other man's blind panic as he skidded, fell, regained his feet, and jumped blindly from the base of the structure to go running off into the night.

Too exhausted, too weary and hungry to chase after him now and face yet another fight, Maggot decided to retrieve the sword dropped on the top of the platform.

As he turned around, he half-saw, half-sensed some new danger, and dodged to the side as a heavy blow smashed him flat to the stone. His first thought was the panther, that it had returned. He twisted immediately, raising his hands in defense.

And saw above him, squatting on the next ledge, a lanky-armed she-troll.

7.

MAGGOT GRINNED at his good fortune.

She was about his own age. The protruding brow, deep eyes, and sharp slope of her head gave her a penetrating, intelligent appearance. Her height must have been close to eight feet, though it was hard to tell when she was seated on her haunches. She had broad shoulders and a nice round belly. Her thick, hard, and nearly hairless skin was a beautiful dark slate color. There was a big rock at the end of one of her arms, poised to smash him.

He stuck his tongue out, like he had just eaten something that tasted awful. It was the troll expression for no, but lest she not understand he added, "Don't hit me, I'm a friend."

Her eyes flew open and she flung the rock into the air as she jumped back. "It talks!"

"Of course I talk," Maggot laughed, ducking as the stone landed with a crack and chips of it flew in his direction.

"Aaaaahh!" she screamed, retreating around the corner of the pyramid, and climbing to a higher level. She stopped, craning her neck out to see him, as though she half-expected him to disappear.

He sat up, smacking his lips. "Got anything to eat?" It was a traditional troll greeting among strangers. Since this was her territory, she should have offered first, but he asked anyway. He was hungry.

Her brow ridge twitched like a snake caught in a hawk's talons, until

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she stuck out her tongue and shook her head for an answer. Then she turned, screaming, and loped lengthways across the steps on three limbs, slapping the top of her head with her big, flat hand.

"Wait!" Maggot started after her. She disappeared around another of the monument's sides, but when he rounded the corner a moment later she was gone. He looked up the steps and saw nothing. The pool stretched out like a long, dark hole below. On the far side of it he saw the shaggy mound of the big-clawed creature, and heard the cracks as it stood on its hind legs to tear a branch from a tree. But there was no sign of her among the deer or anywhere below.

On the next ledge, however, he saw a rough hole. He jumped down to investigate and found himself standing before a broken wall that led into the carved mountain. Eyes peered out at him from within, a pair of ovoid amber gems that glinted in the faint light.

He crouched non-threateningly, leaning forward on both arms. "Hello," he said, politely tapping his chin with his fingers. "My name's Maggot, of Deep Caves Band."

It was a truth of sorts. His mother had been forced to wander from band to band because of him, and the other trolls' lack of acceptance, so that he had no real band as a child. But that was an odd thing, as usually trolls wandered for only a few seasons upon reaching adulthood. And wherever they went, the two of them had been known as "that troll and her animal, from Deep Caves Band."

The troll stepped forward until Maggot could see her face. Her large nostrils dilated, sniffing quizzically, then squeezed shut in disbelief. She leaned back, and slapped her face repeatedly with both hands, then bent her neck forward to look at him again.

"Hello," he repeated.

"Go away!"

"What's your name?"

She took another tripedal step forward and then sat down.

"Holly."

"Hello, Holly." He hunkered back on his haunches, resting his arms on his knees. Trolls were slow thinkers, and he'd learned to get on well by not rushing them.

She sniffed again, and lifted her brow questioningly.

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"Yes?" he prompted.

"Your name is Maggot?"

"Ragweed, Windy's mate, he named me that because I was small and white and they found me crawling on a dead body."

"Hee!" She grinned, rocking in amusement.

"Windy was my mother, a troll from Deep Caves Band many nights' travel north of here. She's the one who found me when I was a baby and she raised me as her own."

She snorted. "Sometimes I hear things that aren't really there. The voices of other trolls echoing from the ridges. Tonight, when I heard the warning beat," she lifted her knuckles and tapped the tattoo on her chest, "I thought I was hearing things again. But that was you."

"Yes."

"I made the greeting call when I heard you." She thumped out another pattern. "Why didn't you answer me?"

"I didn't know it was you, Holly. I just thought I heard it wrong, that it was the sound of my own warning coming back to me. My thoughts were elsewhere, on the man I chased."

"That *other* man?"

Like a turn in a deep cave, that suddenly took him out of the light and into total darkness, Maggot had a realization. He'd forgotten who he was for a moment. She saw him *only* as a man and not as a troll. The trolls he'd grown up around had eventually come to see him for himself, as part of their bands even if he wasn't like them. But she didn't. She couldn't.

"The other man," he answered. "I need help catching him. Where's the rest of your band? If you take me to your First, I can explain why. He can ask for a vote."

"There are no other trolls."

"What?"

"No other trolls, only Holly." She tapped her eyes lightly, then slapped her head back and forth between her big flat palms, until she stopped to stare at him again. "Crazy Holly, who hears things and sees things. Lonely Holly."

"Why don't you return to your Band?" asked Maggot.

"For winter after winter after winter after winter, Holly is the Band, Holly is the First. Holly is a band of one."

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"What happened to the others?"

She made a sour face, sticking out her tongue several times in a row. "I don't know. We were Piebald Mountain Band, just nine of us there at the end. The summer before winter before winter before winter before winter — "

"Four winters past," said Maggot. Adding things precisely was very important to trolls, as was verifying the number, because everything a band did as a whole was decided by a vote.

"You can add?" she said incredulously. Her voice lost the slow cadence used by trolls when talking to someone whose head had been damaged. She studied him sideways. "I didn't know if you could count, that's all. You — "

"I belonged to Deep Cave Band, before I started wandering." It was common for trolls of a certain age to wander a year or two, perhaps visiting other bands in search of mates. He didn't mention that he had gone wandering in search of people.

"How was I supposed to know you could count?" she said finally, but mostly to herself. "So you understand then? My friend Myrtle and I went wandering away from the band the summer before four winters ago, looking for mates. There were no unmated men in our group. They were all old men."

Maggot grunted, rapping his knuckles on the ground in acknowledgment. "And then?"

She started rocking, and sucked on her knobby fingertips briefly before she continued. "We didn't find anybody. I don't know what it's like in the north, but around here people are moving into the mountains, all over them, and passing through them all the time, and we found traces of people everywhere but no other trolls."

"It's the same where I come from. A lot of sickness too, a coughing sickness, caught from people."

"Yes, that's what it's been like. We had a hard time finding carrion, because animals scavenged first. Food was hard to find, harder than it is now. So one night Myrtle and I stayed out too long. We lost each other, and she didn't meet me back at the cave before dawn. I sniffed for her every night for weeks and couldn't find a scent. She was just gone. When I finally returned to our home to get help, the Band was gone too. No odor to indicate where they'd gone or why."

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The final words trailed off. She continued rocking. Her nostrils were flared wide open.

Maggot grunted again. "That's worse than sunlight. I'm very sorry to hear about that."

"Now Holly lives here all alone, in these people caves."

"So you've been here for a while?"

"Since midwinter, four winters back, when I was searching for my band. It's not a bad place. You see Big Stinky?" She waved a thick finger in the direction of the tree-eating giant.

"Yes." Big Stinky was a good name for the beast.

"He doesn't bother me much. When the lions come in, or the wolves, they might kill a deer, but Big Stinky chases them off. Then I get to eat what's left. Sometimes he kills a lion or a wolf, rips them open with those big claws if they come too close. Then I've got that to eat too. I ate four wolves last winter, and a lion the summer before that, and a deer about three moons back after Big Stinky chased off — "

"Holly," Maggot interrupted softly. "I need help. Do you have a hoard here? People things you've gathered?"

She stared at him suspiciously. Trolls treasured their hordes, counting the items over and over again, comparing their counts with each other. "What kind of things?"

"Shiny, sharp things. Big claws, to fit in my hand. Little claws on ends of branches, that I can send flying through the air." He needed to give her a reason. "With them I can bring us fresh meat."

She perked up, rubbing her belly. "I've only eaten meat once since the last no-moon." Then her joy subsided, and her shoulders sunk again. "But I don't have any people things."

Maggot sighed. It was too much to hope for.

She bent forward, sniffing and peering closely at his shoulders. "What's been eating you?" she asked.

He touched the blood caked on his face and neck. "A panther. He tried to eat me, but I showed him a troll is no easy meal."

She smacked her lips vigorously. "That's the truth."

"I need your help, Holly."

"Me?"

"It'll take two trolls to do it."

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"There's only two of us here."

"That's the truth of it." He picked up a piece of stone and tapped it on the weather-worn rock. By troll custom, he ought to groom her as he asked the favor, picking over her skin for ticks and other parasites. But he thought she was still too skittish to approach that closely. "That other man?"

"Other *man*? Oh. The man who fought you."

"That man, yes. I need your help to find and catch him. I thought he was a friend of mine, but he just tried to kill me."

"A friend?" She stood up, walked in a wide circle, slapping her hands on her chest.

"What's wrong?"

She turned and smacked her hands on the terrace, right in front of him, baring her teeth. "You said he was your friend, but if he's no troll, then you're no troll."

Her hot breath washed over his face, but Maggot didn't flinch. "You're my friend too, Holly. Does that mean you're no troll?"

"Ai!" This confused her. She threw her arms up in the air, spun, returned to her original spot, and sat down again. "Sometimes I think Holly is no troll. There are no more trolls. Only loneliness."

"I've felt that way too."

She preened the wrinkles on her face and said nothing.

It was getting late into the night. She'd have to seek cover before dawn, or be turned to stone by the sun. If he was going to get her help it'd have to come soon. He wanted the man's weapons more than anything. "Help me capture this other man, and I will give you fresh meat."

Her head lifted. "Meat?"

"Let's take a vote," Maggot said. "Everyone who wants to catch the man first, and then eat fresh meat, raise a hand." He held his up in the air.

After a second's hesitation she raised her hand too.

"Let's go get him then." Maggot rose, his muscles aching as they unbent and stretched.

He hoped that Holly's help would be enough. Because while he was sitting here, he'd realized what the flash of light meant. Ehren was a wizard. Maggot had met wizards before, had seen them bespell demons and use their charms to shake the earth.

This would be the first time he went hunting one.

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8.

MAGGOT TRUDGED to the structure's peak to retrieve the sword. He should not have squatted so long. He should have gone immediately to get some water to drink. But he did, and he hadn't, and now he lived with the consequences.

Holly followed him. A cool breeze swept over the broad, square platform. She lifted her head to the wind and sniffed.

Maggot felt the balance of the weapon. It was short, leaf-shaped, with the tip a good weight for thrusting. More to his liking than the longer swords Bran had tried to teach him to use. He looked out from the height and imagined that one could watch the entire valley from here. His admiration for the people who'd built this edifice increased in proportion. "Do you smell anything interesting?"

"Cherry blossoms, over that way." She licked her lips, leaned on her knuckles, and took a few steps toward the edge of the platform. "A couple months, they'll be ripe to eat."

"What about the man?"

"Him too," she said.

"Can you lead me to him?"

She snorted. "Aren't people easy to smell? I sniffed it earlier. Knew where it was, even before you gave out the warning to let me know it was here."

Maggot considered this. So the stranger was an it and he wasn't? He thought about asking her to explain the difference, but he knew the answer, having heard it from others so many times before. *You're not like* them. *You're not a troll, but you're not a man either.* He thought about confessing that his display wasn't an attempt to warn her, because he hadn't known she was there. But he decided not to. Better not to antagonize her, not when he needed her help.

"Where is he?" Maggot asked, with the slightest stress on the last word.

"Beyond the cave of stone trees, over by the nine mound. Or the four mound, if you're counting from the other direction."

"Good. Can you lead me there? I'll draw him out, get his attention on — " literally, in the troll's language, *get his nose aimed at* — "me."

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"Then what?"

"Can you jump on him, pin him to the ground? Like you were wrestling him."

"Sure." She smacked her lips eagerly, then furrowed her brow. "Will it be that easy?"

"No. Probably not."

She waited for him to explain.

"If he's not drawn out, then we go back down the cliff and look for a new route to the top." An old troll saying. "If he comes out and attacks me, then you jump on him from your hiding place, just like we said. If he turns on you, I'll bite him hard with this tooth." He held up the sword. "How does that smell?"

She grinned. "Like rotten meat."

"Good," he smiled back. "I'm glad you like it. Now you show me where he is. Let's go quietly. Remember that people hear better than we do."

The last phrase slipped out of his mouth without thinking. What was he? A person or a troll? Was he one thing with Bran or Ehren, and another with his mother or Holly?

Big Stinky and his herd of deer grazed farther away, under the trees. They left behind them a swath of shredded vegetation. The ground was torn out, the little trees were stripped bare, and the big trees were shorn of lower branches. Maggot saw suddenly how the plaza, and the area around the mounds, remained clear. He went down to the pool for a drink. The bottom was thick with muck; even if he did not stir the water, it was unfit to drink.

"Don't fall in," Holly warned him.

"Don't worry," Maggot said.

"It has no bottom. Anything you toss in there sinks and sinks and sinks, no matter how big."

"That's not possible," Maggot said.

"I upended a tree trunk in there, not one of those," she said, indicating the giants that rose two hundred feet into the sky. "But big. It sank down and down and disappeared until nothing showed."

With that, she knelt by the edge and cupped big handfuls of water into her mouth, until it ran down her neck and across her breasts. Maggot

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walked to the fountain in the wall at the end of the pool. Four squat creatures, strange mixtures of familiar beasts, toad and lion and eagle, like the statues that lined the steps upon the pyramid, were carved in the wall where the hillside met the pool. Their heads were raised at various levels, with holes for mouths. Water trickled out of one of them, though by cracks and stains it appeared that it had come from the others too at one time. Maggot stepped out on the sculpture's feet, and sipped from its mouth.

"Giving it a kiss?" Holly giggled, making a sound like gravel rolling down a hillside.

Maggot spun to hush her, and almost fell in. He saved himself by grabbing onto the monster's stone tooth, but Holly laughed, as loud as a landslide. She pursed her wide lips, as if kissing, and giggled again.

He jumped back to the shore. There was nothing he could do about the noise now. And the wizard already knew they were there. "That was good," he said quietly, wiping his mouth on his arm.

"Not as good as something to eat," Holly said, rubbing her stomach. She looked to the east and sniffed the air. "Sun the Killer will be coming soon."

Maggot acknowledged this. "Let's go. Show me where he's hiding."

Holly looked at him seriously. "You act like the First."

He turned and led the way, as though he was. He'd tried to become the First in Deep Cave Band, to do what he could to save his mother and those around her, but he'd been outvoted in favor of Ragweed, his stepfather, and afterward he'd left. How strange to be First now in this Band of the Lost.

They snaked their way through the irregularly spaced mounds. The big structures made the size of the city deceptive. It was larger than he had guessed. They came to a low structure in another open area, a stone platform with tiers of broad flat steps on one side. The top contained a rectangular building, open with columns facing the steps.

Hiding behind a small group of prickly shrubs, oblique to the open front, Holly sniffed the ground and the air several times. "He's in there," she whispered, in a voice as loud as Maggot's normal tone.

"Are you certain?"

She pressed her lips together quietly. It looked more like a kiss than a yes.

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"Can you sneak around behind, and climb on top of the building?"

"I've done it before. But why? There's nothing up there."

"Because I'm going to draw him out. I want you to jump on him."

Her nostrils flared. "That's a good idea."

"If he doesn't come out, then we'll meet back here and make a new plan."

This time her mouth was unmistakably kissy.

He ignored it. "I'll give you a few moments to go, and then I'll approach the front until he notices — " literally, *until he smells* — "me coming."

She crept away quickly.

Even before he saw her dark bulk ease onto the stone roof, he walked toward the main entrance. He stopped at the bottom of the steps. "Are you awake in there, Ehren?"

No reply came from the darkness.

Maggot stepped up onto the first, then the second platform, calling again. "Could you pass some wind, please, just to let me know you're there?"

He stepped up two more of the platforms. The top of his head now rose high enough to peer into the shadowed room behind the pillars.

Gripping the sword in front of him, he ascended to the penultimate step below the platform. Close enough that the wizard couldn't miss him but still not close enough for his eyes to penetrate the complete darkness beneath the roof, not with the moon down. He avoided glancing up to see if Holly was perched there. "Hey, wizard. If you intend to use your magic against me, come out and do it. I can't stop you."

To his surprise, he heard a sudden shifting inside the edifice. A second later, Ehren appeared beside one of the columns. His bow was drawn, the pale wood curving in the shadows like a crescent moon. An arrow pointed straight at Maggot's chest, from not more than fifteen feet away.

"You're a better swimmer than I would have guessed," he said. "Who sent you to follow me?"

"Why did you follow me here?" Maggot demanded.

"Me, follow you?" Ehren laughed, dropping the point of the arrow just a bit as he did.

"Why didn't you answer when I spoke to you before?"

"You spoke the Snake —— tongue!"

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There was a word there Maggot didn't understand, any more than he understood the reference. He stuck his tongue way out of his mouth and wiggled it. "It's not a snake tongue. No fork. See?"

Ehren tensed, jerking the bow up toward Maggot's voice. "Mockery and lies — just what I expect from someone speaking the Snake —— tongue."

"You speak it too," Maggot said, sidling over after he spoke this time. "Do you mock and lie also?"

"Stay where you are and answer my questions!" Ehren inched forward, almost out of the shadow of the doorway.

"Here is your sword," Maggot said. He set it down on the top step, right at the very edge, letting it clink against the stone. "You dropped it. I'll leave it right here for you."

"What are you doing?"

"You dropped your sword," Maggot said, backing down the steps. As his head dropped below the other man's line of vision, Ehren came forward again.

"Wait! Where are you going?"

"Away from that arrow," Maggot answered.

Three things happened at once: Maggot retreated down the steps, Ehren ran forward, and Holly leapt from the roof, smashing the wizard to the upper terrace. Maggot bounded up the steps and found her sitting on Ehren. He was conscious, but too terrified to struggle. His eyes were wide with terror. As Maggot approached, Ehren slowly stretched out one hand toward the knife at his belt. Holly slapped it down like she was swatting an insect. The man held back his cry, but cringed. When he saw Maggot, he spat. "You animal!"

"Does it talk too?" Holly asked, her brow wrinkled as if she were trying to understand how grunts could be words. "What's it saying?"

"He just called me an animal," Maggot answered, not taking his eyes from Ehren's.

She snorted. "That's funny. It called you an animal."

It was and he wasn't? Maggot said nothing.

Ehren glared at him. "You can speak with that creature? Do you have it bespelled, like one of your demon-snakes?"

"No snakes," Maggot replied, switching languages. He wiggled his tongue again. "How do you know this language?"

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Before the other man could answer, Holly spoke. "Hey, Maggot?"

"Yes?"

"You promised meat."

"I did."

"Well," she said, grabbing Ehren's head in her big knobby-knuckled hand and turning it from side to side like someone examining a pumpkin while he screamed. "Do you want to take the first bite or can I? I'm hungry."

"We aren't going to eat him."

Anger flashed across her face. She squeezed Ehren's head until his screaming stopped. All she needed to do was tighten her grip and it would pop open. "You promised me."

"I promised you fresh meat. I meant deer meat. With his bow — " literally, *his killing smile*, so-called for the shape of it seen sideways — "I can catch a deer for us. Venison will taste much sweeter than his meat."

She grimaced doubtfully.

"Have you ever eaten people before?"

She thrust out her tongue.

Maggot mimicked the gesture. "You don't want to. It tastes terrible." He didn't know this — he'd never tasted human flesh, and wasn't about to, any more than one troll would eat another. Nor was he about to lose his only source of information — why had Ehren pretended to be his friend, then tried to kill him?

"I don't want to wait until tomorrow night to eat," she pouted.

"You won't have to," Maggot promised. "Is your cave big enough to hold all of us?" The word for *all of us* was the same as the word for *band*.

"Oh, yes. It's not large enough to hold the entire band though. My old band, that is."

"Good. I'll tie him up and we'll put him in there. Then I'll go get some meat for you."

She let go of Ehren's head, and it bounced off the stone. He groaned, shook it off, and looked up at Maggot, almost hopefully. "What were you talking about?"

"She wants to rip off your head and suck your brains out through your neck," Maggot answered, removing a rope looped at the man's waist.

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Ehren snorted one desperate laugh. When Maggot didn't change expression, he twisted his head, eyes flicking anxiously at Holly's massive form.

"That's not wholly true," Maggot admitted, as he pried one of Ehren's arms from under Holly's leg and wrapped the rope tightly around it. "They don't really suck the brains out. They use their tongues to scoop them out. You ever see a troll's tongue at work?"

Ehren struggled, futilely. "If you wish to kill me for your Snake *Queen*," — that was the word Maggot didn't understand before; he wondered what a queen was — "then do it. But don't mock me this way."

"I'm not mocking," said Maggot, shifting to the other side to bind that arm. "I've seen trolls do that to a head before."

He stopped struggling. "And you would leave me to one of these monsters?"

Maggot finished tying the man's hands behind his back, then he patted Holly on the shoulder and she rose. He jerked his prisoner to his feet. "No, if you tell me why you followed me here, I'll spare your life."

"*Me* follow *you*?" he said, repeating his earlier surprise.

Holly licked her lips loudly and made an impatient slurping noise. Ehren's legs trembled, and Maggot had to prop him up.

"Maybe," Maggot added judiciously.

9.

THEY WALKED in silence back to the pyramid, shoving Ehren ahead of them. Holly sniffed the air nervously. It was still and very cold. Morning could not be too far off.

"You can't let it eat me," Ehren protested as Maggot pushed him up the stairs. "We are both men, not monsters like that thing."

"She is no monster," Maggot said angrily, shoving him ahead, all the while Holly was asking, "What's it saying, huh, Maggot? Huh? What's it saying *now*?"

Holly's cave inside the huge stone mound faced the northwest corner. The entrance was part of a false wall, not a door, it appeared to Maggot. A thin skin of marble had cracked and been enlarged. A tight passage,

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cluttered with fallen stones and Holly's waste, penetrated the structure and went around a corner. Just past the bend, a narrow doorway opened into a small chamber that smelled heavily of troll. Ehren gagged at the odor.

Maggot stripped the wizard — if that's indeed what Ehren proved to be — and found a bag containing pieces of hard, dried meat. He smelled it, licked it, tasting the salt, and then bit into it. He had to jerk his head side-to-side to break a piece off, but it softened up as he chewed it.

"Meat," he said, offering a piece to Holly.

She snatched it eagerly from his hand, put it in her mouth, then spit it out again. It flew down the corridor like a miniature arrow and clicked when it hit stone. "Yuck! You call that meat? I've eaten old bones that tasted better."

"I'll take the bow and go find something for us."

"Don't go!" She shuddered. "The sun'll be up soon."

"I can travel in the sunlight, Holly."

She snorted disdainfully, and moved around on her haunches as if she couldn't get comfortable, but she didn't say any more.

Sorting through the rest of the man's possessions, Maggot found a crystal that filled his fist, glowing faint blue and seeming to pulse as if it had its own slow heartbeat. An uneasy shiver ran through his bones, and he shoved it back into Ehren's bag. "I'll tie his legs together too."

"I'll make sure it doesn't leave," Holly promised.

There were several ways to understand that comment. Maggot didn't ask for explanations; he cut off a length of rope and bound the man's ankles.

"Why are you doing this?" Ehren asked.

"I have to go out for a short time," Maggot answered.

"Don't leave me here alone with that monster," he begged in a husky whisper. "I thought you had questions for me."

Holly shifted uncomfortably. "What's all that squeaking mean? It's as bad as a squirrel. *Chitter, chitter, chitter.*"

"It means nothing," Maggot said.

"Then tell it to block the cave — " *to shut his mouth* — "because I'm tired. I want to sleep, and I don't need any squeaking keeping me awake."

Ehren twisted in Maggot's grasp. "What's it saying?"

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"She says if you say another word, she won't keep her promise to me to leave your skull alone. If I were you, I'd lie here very still and pretend I was dead."

His eyes grew large, and he stiffened at once.

"She won't eat you if she thinks you're dead," he lied. He hoped Ehren didn't know that trolls preferred their meat already dead. Turning, he said to Holly, "I'll return as soon as I can. You will leave the person alone, won't you?"

"If I don't get too hungry," she said. And then, grabbing Ehren by the arms tied behind his back, she picked him up and dragged him into a corner of the tiny chamber.

"Remember," Maggot called out. "Be quiet. Play dead and she won't eat you." In trollish, "I'll be back soon."

He exited the broken wall and stood out on the platform, armed with Ehren's weapons. The sky was noticeably bluer. He hated leaving Ehren alone with Holly. Worse, he hated going off to hunt without first cleaning his wounds and getting some rest. But he had a promise to keep, and there was no telling what Holly might do if she didn't eat. One deer could give Holly meat to gorge over a couple of days, but he'd be better off seeking something small instead; he didn't have the strength to drag anything large back to the pyramid or up the steep incline. Also it was best to avoid the slope where the panther lurked and the direction in which he'd last seen Big Stinky.

Limping down the steps, he headed out of the dead city and into the broad valley. As the land narrowed, sloping down toward a thin trickle of a stream, he saw dark round shapes huddled on branches about fifteen feet high. Gobble-birds.

He drew his bow and shot at the largest target. It squawked, spreading its wings as it fell off the branch. There were sudden cries of *gobble gobble gobble* as the other birds flew ponderously to the ground and took off running in all directions. The wounded bird flapped around in a frenzy, rolling down the muddy bank, and into the stream. Maggot dispatched it quickly. It was a good-sized bird, close to thirty pounds. Its black feathers had a bronze sheen to them. The skin that hung from its beak was pale blue.

As he carried his prize back toward the pyramid, songbirds began their

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morning carols. Dawn, tinged with shades of orange and peach, ripened to the east, beyond the city and behind the mountains. The two miles back seemed to take much longer to hike than on the way out, but it gave him time to think.

Talking again — both to Holly, who reminded him of his childhood friends and acquaintances, and to Ehren, who had reminded him of his friends Sinnglas and Bran — confused Maggot. Whatever he'd gone looking for when he fled the imperial city, he had not found it.

He climbed the steps of the pyramid as day spread feathery white clouds like wings across the light blue sky. He had lived in both daylight and darkness, but to which did he belong?

Holly's snores rumbled in the stone tunnel like a spinning wind. He stepped over her, dropping the gobble-bird by her side, and went to see the prisoner. Maggot's eyes had not adjusted to the darkness yet, so he could see almost nothing.

"Praise the snake demon," Ehren whispered. "You return, and I honor you for it."

"Why?" Maggot asked.

"I thought you meant me to die here."

"Perhaps I still do." The questions bubbled up like a fountain he could no longer contain. "Why were you following me? How did you trail me here? Tell me, tell me three times, and tell me true."

Ehren turned his head and spat suddenly. Then leaned his chin forward as if he meant to take back the spit. He glanced sideways at Maggot, then slowly turned his head. "Forgive me. I just praised your false god, in joy at seeing you, so I don't know why I should have reacted so to your perfidious custom. It is clear you do not know any better."

Maggot stretched out on the floor and laid his head upon his arm. "Speak when you have something to tell me. Until then, do not disturb me."

"Wait."

Maggot closed his eyes. "I'm listening."

Shifting uncomfortably, Ehren said, "Tie my hands in front, damn you — my arms have gone numb."

It went against Maggot's nature to confine creatures or hurt them for amusement. With one hand he reached around and found Ehren's fingers

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were cool to his touch. He'd knotted the ropes too tight. The other man sighed and untensed his shoulders as soon as Maggot loosed the first knot.

Wiggling his fingers, Ehren said softly, "What does the Snake Queen want in these lands? Does she seek the Jewel? Tell me the truth, and I will see you rewarded with wealth beyond your greediest desire."

Maggot only heard the name of the Snake Queen. "I ate a snake the other day. One of the black ones with stripes."

"You mock me again."

"You ask too many questions. What is the *Jewel*?"

"The jewel of Arop," Ehren said.

"You two are as loud as thunder," Holly grumbled, sounding drowsy and grumpy. "Is the storm going to be over soon?"

"Sorry," Maggot answered. "We'll keep it down."

"What did it say," Ehren whispered, almost too soft for Maggot to hear.

"She asked if your brains were ready to eat yet. I told her they were still warming up." With Ehren's hands half-untied, Maggot thought of the crystal in his bag and reached for it.

"Meat!" Holly said, across the room. "Oh, Maggot. Thank you!"

"I was glad to hunt it for you," he answered.

Across the dark cell, the bird's ribs cracked as she turned it inside out and started chewing. She spit out some feathers. There were slurping sounds as her tongue cleaned out the stuff inside.

Ehren shuddered.

"Why did you follow me here?" Maggot asked him, fingers sifting the bag. He could hear Ehren working lose his bounds, saving him the trouble of untying them.

"Maggot," Holly interrupted in a singsong voice. "Can't you stop squeaking with it, and come over here."

"Just a moment," he told her, his nose wrinkling. He thought he caught a whiff of the scent trolls put off when they wanted to mate. But he wasn't sure, not even in this small room. His inability to recognize such smells or respond in kind had been a source of great embarrassment to him and amusement to the other trolls. Part of the gap that had sent him in search of human mates.

"But Maggot." She ambled over, stretching out her big hands to rub

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her rough fingertips gently over his skin. She picked something off his back — a loose scab — and put it in her mouth. She was grooming him! He shifted his weight away from her hands. She had taken the turkey for an interest gift — the signal from a male troll to a female he wished to mate.

His fingers closed on the pulse of the crystal and pulled it out of the bag. "Is this the Jewel you mean?"

"No," said Ehren. "But it'll do." He lifted his hands in front of him, making an odd gesture as he blurted out words in a language Maggot didn't understand.

The heartbeat pulsed into hot life, burning Maggot's fingers, and he started to fling it aside. Before it had gone an inch from his hand, it flared, shooting out a searing white light that burst in Maggot's eyes, blinding him, lancing pain through his head — the last thing he glimpsed was Ehren frantically untying his feet. Holly screamed in terror.

Maggot grabbed for Ehren's legs and missed. "Catch him, Holly!"

But she thrashed on the floor, shrieking. Rocks tumbled in the doorway as Ehren climbed over them. Maggot staggered to his feet, rubbing his eyes, trying to push the light out of them but it was hopeless. He fell sideways, reaching for the wall, climbed upright and felt his way toward the exit.

"Maggot? Maggot? Where are you?"

"It's all right, Holly!" He shouted, even though there was no sound to shout above. "I'm going out to catch him."

"No!"

Something slammed into him, knocking him off his feet and away from the door. "Hey!"

"You can't leave me, Maggot," she yelled at him. "You can't leave!"

"I have to," he said, finding his feet. "I'll be back."

"No!"

Her hand smacked him again, and sent him sprawling all the way to the far wall. There was no use being silent. She could smell him, no matter where he was, despite the singed sharp scent to the air.

"He's getting away."

"Let *it* go away. We don't need *it*."

Fury shook Maggot. He'd been tricked, betrayed. He rolled toward Holly's voice, as if going toward her, then dodged the other direction.

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"What about *me*?" she cried.

A stone flew across the room and hit the wall near Maggot with a loud and hollow thunk. Chips of stone flew through the air, striking Maggot and cutting his skin. The next stone clipped his shoulder, and he ducked, covering his head. "Holly! Stop it!"

She roared and rushed past him into the anteroom. Scrapes and clatters and large slabs of stone slamming into each other sounded in the doorway. Even unblinded, he wouldn't have dared to go through the doorway.

"What are you doing, Holly? Stop! Let's talk!"

"You are *not* leaving. I am *not* going to be alone again."

"Holly — "

"I'm *not!*"

Her voice was muffled by the mound she'd built. The big stones slammed into place, one after another, with a grave finality. He was walled up inside the pyramid.

Far away, through the stone, he heard the weird cry of the monster that guarded the pool.

10.

MAGGOT LEANED against the piles of stones. After several hours, he expected his eyes to adjust to the darkness but he still couldn't see a thing. His head throbbed, sore as ever. "It feels like it's almost time for sundeath," he said.

"The shadows are getting long," Holly responded from the other side. "But not quite yet."

Every time he'd tried shifting the rocks, she'd started screaming at him to stop, adding more slabs of stone to the other side.

"You aren't going to leave me in here all night, are you?" he asked. "We'll look for food together."

"No," she said wearily. "You'll just chase after that animal again."

"I promise I won't. He's gone over the mountains by now."

"Maybe, maybe not. I'll sniff out his path to be sure. Then I'll come back and let you out."

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He stood up and paced in the dark. Three steps forward, two to the right to find the pile of feathers and bones left over from the bird. Four steps forward, seven to the left to find the bow and sword and other tools. Two steps beyond that were the stones she'd thrown at him in her first panic. His feet knew and avoided most of the debris scattered on the floor.

"It's too small out here," she said, meaning the anteroom. "I'm squeezed. I've had to see the daylight at the end of the cave all day long." Her voice was terrified.

He retraced his steps. "I'm sorry, Holly. This is a much better room in here. No sun at all. Open it up again."

"No. Maybe at nightend. Depends on what I find."

Maggot sat down.

"You're going to try to run away," she said.

He didn't answer.

"I won't let you," she said.

Her statement was followed by another loud crack as she ripped away another section of the stone veneer and smashed it onto the pile covering the door. He breathed deeply, measuring his strength. It would have to be sufficient.

"Has night come yet?" he asked after another pause.

It was her turn to be silent. After a while, she said, "Yes. I'm going out now. Stay here until I come back."

"I'm not going anywhere," he said.

He pressed his ear to the stone, listening for her to leave. Carefully, he reached up to the top of the pile. It was thinnest there, and he thought he could quickly clear a space big enough to crawl through. He very gently removed one piece of rubble, setting it softly down on the ground. A second piece followed it, and a third. The fourth stone he removed opened a crack as wide as his finger. A gray light filtered in, then was suddenly cut off.

Air blew through a nose. "Stop that!" Holly commanded. She drummed out the danger beat upon her breast.

"I don't want to stay in here," he answered.

There came a sound of smashing and cracking, with more stones piled up against the narrow doorway. He wondered if there was any wall left out there at all.

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"You can quit," he called out. "You can quit!"

She slapped more stones onto the pile. "I'll stay here all night if I have to."

"No," Maggot hollered back. "Just go sniff out the man's trail. Make sure he's gone."

"Don't tell me what to do!"

He measured out the steps of his little prison once again, three steps, two steps, over to the gobble-bird, trying to think of something he could say to change Holly's mind. There was still meat on the wings, and he ate some more, knowing he'd need the strength later. It helped ease his thirst some as well. Two steps, three steps back to where he started. Counting and remembering was an old troll habit, ingrained in him by his mother from earliest childhood so that he would never lose his way in the caverns underground. Just like he had done in those caves, he began to explore, memorizing every crack in the wall and pebble on the floor. When he came around the stones that Holly had hurled at him, he found the chipped block in the wall. He was tracing the outline of the scratch when he felt the block move under his fingers.

"La la la, la," Holly said on the other side of the stone.

"Go on!" Maggot shouted. "I'll wait for you!"

He was already pushing on the block, pulling with his fingernails, until it came loose. He jumped back as it fell so it wouldn't land on his feet. He cringed at the noise, waiting for a reaction from Holly in the antechamber. But there was nothing.

Slowly he put his hand into the vacant space, expecting to find another stone behind the first. Instead, he found emptiness. He thrust his arm into the opening as far as his shoulder, reaching around. There was another hollow behind this wall, just as there had been behind the wall outside.

The mortar that held the stones together turned to grainy dust as he shoved the blocks back and forth, pulling one after another from their perches and setting them quietly on the floor. It became easier as he went, the stones sliding out with less and less effort until a whole group of them fell in a cascade of rock.

He was sure Holly heard it, and he waited for the rush of stones being pulled away from the door as she charged in to stop him. But nothing happened.

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Thrusting the fallen stones aside, he squeezed through the short, narrow opening and found a narrow space between walls. His fingertips searched carefully, finding sculptures like those on the outside of the pyramid. The stone had the unmistakable wear associated with weathering, as though an older structure had been enclosed within a new one, now grown old as well. He retrieved the sword and bow and arrows Ehren had left behind.

The older building behind the false wall had a different shape than the pyramid that covered it. The space between was filled in behind by gravel, but not completely, or else the stone had settled. Pushing the quiver and scabbard ahead of him, Maggot wormed his way over the loose gravel. Carvings at the corner of the old structure left room for him to slip down a level, then another. It almost seemed as if the builders had been intent on preserving the carved men that guarded the older building. With each level he left behind a little skin.

Black surrounded him, a night as dark as the comforting night that trolls looked for when they died. He felt his way ahead, fingers stretching into the darkness. Slight movements of air, feathering over him, guided him down to the bottom level. He shoved his weapons ahead of him, into a space a little more than a foot wide. Stretched out at an angle, pressed tight between a slab of stone and the compacted rubble, he took a deep breath and pushed ahead.

He couldn't move. He tried to ease back and couldn't budge that way either. He was trapped.

The faintest wind stirred on his face, and a whistle, distant but clear, came from the same direction. His chest could not expand enough to draw another breath.

When he released part of the breath he held, however, he found he could move a bit. He kicked, pushing stones back with his toes, with his knees. Finally he could twist the one hand stuck at his side. He thrust stones through his legs, until the arm came free. Then the other slid back to join it, and he was pawing like a dog digging a hole. Or a grave. Because if there was no way forward, there was no longer a way back.

An inch at a time, he wiggled ahead, shoving the quiver in front of him with his forehead, until it dropped away and he saw light coming through a hole as long as his arm, no bigger around than his fist. He shoved the bow

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and the sword after it, and then he attempted to swim through stone, shoving rubble through his legs and kicking it into the emptiness behind him. The hole grew larger. He gulped in breaths of fresh air, listened to a clicking sound from outside, and watched dust motes dance in the sunlight. At last he pushed his head through, and his shoulders.

He was at the base of the pyramid, where the windblown tree had upturned the foundation stones. With a cry of agony he twisted free, pulling himself through the last hole and into a grotto formed by cracked and upturned slabs of stone. Too long blinded by darkness, he was now blinded by light. He lifted his arm to shield his face and heard the clicks again, only a few feet away. When he bent to gather his weapons he saw the source.

A skunk stood beside her nest, hidden in the tumble-down rocks, stamping her feet and hissing at him. Her tail was raised straight up in the air.

"Please," he said quietly, "don't spray — "

At the sound of his voice, she jumped, emitting a jet of mist straight at him. He grabbed his weapons and tried to leap over her, but he stumbled. She sprayed again.

He covered his stinging eyes, and squeezed through the gap between the roots and rocks. He stumbled over the vine-covered stones, across the dead tree, and out into the broad, empty plaza occupied only by daylight.

A lone carrion bird circled above, a black slash wheeling in the blue sky. Beneath it, on the edge of the long pool, Maggot spied a lump on the ground. He went to its side, saw what it was, and knelt beside it.

The man he'd known as Ehren had been slashed from crotch to collarbone by Big Stinky.

Maggot stood up, fists clenched for a reason he didn't understand. He started to walk away, then spun and kicked the body. He kicked it again and again, so viciously it nearly separated the parts. His breath came hard through his nose.

The jewel rested a short distance away. Maggot picked it up — it was cold to the touch, as lifeless as the corpse. He carried it over and threw it in the pool, watching it sink into the bottomless muck and disappear. Then, with a second glance at the carrion bird, he dragged Ehren's body over to the edge and did the same, waiting until it also sank.

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Holly would have to be in hiding. Maggot bounded up the steps to tell her what had happened. His fists were still clenched — it was her fault, she was the one who made Ehren afraid, made him run. Halfway up the pyramid, Maggot faltered. He could see Holly standing outside her cave.

Her back was bent, a chunk of stone in her hand. Her head was turning, eyes lifted up to the west.

She'd torn down so much of her hiding place to block in Maggot that the sun had caught her just before it set. Turned her to stone. His fists fell open.

"Oh, Holly," Maggot said softly.

He stood there, as still as she was. Then he went back and snatched up the weapons. Stupid man. Stupid troll. He didn't need men or trolls. He was covered by a layer of dust, filling the smaller scratches that overlay the deeper cuts from the panther. He smelled like a skunk. He needed a bath, a place to rest. That was all.

The path to the rim of the valley passed half in sunlight, half beneath the shadow of the trees. All he could think of, as he went, was how happy he'd been to laugh with Ehren, and how good it had been to sit with Holly and speak the familiar language of his youth.

Without realizing it, Maggot turned toward the lands where men and trolls lived, and lengthened his stride until he was running along the piebald trail.

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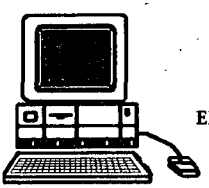

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

THE GLOBALIZATION OF LEAPING KICKS

THERE IS nothing more dangerous than success—especially when it comes to moviemaking. We've known that about Hollywood films for forever. A film that does well in the U.S. and beyond will set off a vicious chain of events involving sequels, spin-offs, and countless derivative and degrading copycat movies.

I used to believe that somehow international films were immune to that imitative downward spiral. With state and independent producer supports for filmmakers as well as audiences that really seemed to celebrate a talented writer-director as a true "auteur," the making of films in foreign lands appeared to be more an act of artistic creation than an act of commerce.

Perhaps that was never true. In any case, it doesn't seem true anymore.

Globalization is a powerful and terrible thing.

Case in point is how every oh-so-serious art house director from China thinks that they need to start making martial arts films because they're hot (and cool) and beloved by audiences worldwide. The Chinese film industry has discovered the power of ka-ching, baby. And the Chairman's children now know that big box office means grasping for dollars and euros, as well as yuans.

Film geek turned filmmaker Quentin Tarantino is partially to blame for making martial arts movies hip. Although it's not as though we haven't always loved the sheer wacked-out energy of Hong Kong "kung fu." (There's good reason that Bruce Lee has been considered a demigod on both

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sides of the Pacific for more than thirty years.)

Even more influential was the critical and phenomenal worldwide box-office success of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). That film was a watershed. An art house director, celebrated in the West, embraced the popular wuxia (wuxha) chivalrous fable and made it work. And, more to the point, made lots of money doing so.

I was happy when Ang Lee made *Crouching Tiger*. The martial arts were gorgeous. The women even more so. (Any movie with the divine Michelle Yeoh in it, and I'm there!) And Lee, known for his subtlety and sensitivity, gave his film more emotional depth than the average martial arts movie. His tragic and heroic love stories had the power to affect audiences around the world, even those who had never been fans of martial arts movies before.

After *Crouching Tiger*, it seemed as though every respected auteur of the Mainland wanted to dirty their hands in popular genre filmmaking. Zhang Yimou, best known for exquisitely shot, realistic dramas like *Ju Dou* (1991) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1992) and *The Road Home* (1999), has recently gone in hunt of blockbuster success with the big-budget martial arts extravaganzas *Hero* (2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004).

And now, Chen Kaige has become the latest of China's art-house auteurs to go for the gold through martial arts moviemaking. It's a move that obviously has the global marketplace in mind, but unfortunately doesn't serve either the temperament of the filmmaker or the entertainment needs of his audience.

Chen, a member of the Fifth Generation school of Mainland filmmakers, made a name for himself with visually striking and emotionally complex films like *Farewell My Concubine* (1993). But like his film school classmate and former cinematographer, Zhang Yimou, Chen often fell afoul of Chinese censors in his early career. This gradually changed as his films became less rebellious and controversial at the same time that China moved for a wider presence in world film.

Headlines asked, in 1998, whether Chen had "sold out" by making the patriotic historical drama *The Emperor and the Assassin*. Perhaps the poor man did feel compelled to sell his soul at some point to appease the government and gain access to larger budgets and both domestic and international release for his films. And maybe his

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latest film, *The Promise*, is actually an elaborate allegory detailing his fateful Faustian bargain. If so, he shouldn't have to worry whether government censors will get the point, since *The Promise* is a movie that will likely leave most audience members, from Shanghai to Chicago, scratching their heads in bafflement and disappointment.

The movie opens with a voice-over explanation that the story takes place during a time some 3000 years ago, when humans and gods occupied the same Earthly realm. We then see a dirty little ragamuffin orphan girl grasp a biscuit from the hand of a dead soldier on a battlefield of utter carnage. She soon loses her morsel, and her despair is profound, until a lovely goddess, Manshen (Chen Hong) floats into view. The goddess could have just shown a little compassion for a waif and given her a square meal and wished her well. Instead, she strikes a deal with the little tyke. She can have lifelong comfort and wealth and fame, if she accepts the fact that she will lose any man she loves.

I can't think of one little girl, anywhere in the world, who wouldn't go for that deal! Creature comforts far outweigh dreams of romance at the age of five. (Or almost any other age except sixteen, for that matter.) And what self-respecting goddess makes a binding contract with a hungry kid below the age of reason? I don't mean to be culturally insensitive or anything, but Manshen should turn in her deity papers. At least Hera messed with kids because they were the illegitimate children of her rivals for Zeus's affections. If Manshen has a reason for her capricious malice, we never learn it from Chen's movie.

Instead, the flighty godhead floats away and twenty years pass by in the blink of a eye. It is again (still?) a time of war. An arrogant general, Guangming (Hiroyuki Sanada) is about to draw his barbarian enemies (looking a bit like bad opera valkyries) into battle by luring them into a horseshoe canyon with a group of sacrificial slaves. These include Kunlun (Jang Dong-Gun), a man who can run, on his knees no less, faster than a herd of stampeding bulls. (The special effects here are so cartoonish, you almost expect the Road Runnerish Kunlun to go "Beep! Beep!" as he tears through the dusty canyon.)

Understandably, the general is impressed by Kunlun's speed and talent for survival. So, Guangming claims him as his personal slave. And when the general is wounded and incapable of his own heroics,

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he shortly thereafter sends Kunlun, disguised in his crimson armor, to save his king when the palace is overrun by the legions of the evil Duke of the North, Wuhuan (Nicholas Tse).

Conveniently, our little orphan, Qingcheng (Cecilia Cheung), is now a "princess" and the consort of the king. Still her comfort level is not high, since she is, when we meet her again, precariously perched on the roof of the palace, surrounded by armed soldiers. In addition, I'm assuming that she doesn't actually love her regal companion, who disses her by suggesting that she strip to distract the military horde.

Sounds like it's time to sue Manshen for not honoring her side of the bargain, but instead, Qingcheng tussles ineffectively with the nasty king, and ends up dangling from the roof tiles. It looks bad for our heroine, until the disguised Kunlun kills the king, catches the falling Qingcheng, and rides off.

Up to this point, the story of *The Promise* almost retains its own fantasy logic. But when the various characters start to interrelate, the plot becomes a jangled and jumbled collection of scenes, most of which don't seem to hang together or transition from one to the next with any kind of grace or lucidity.

It all appears to have something to do with some sort of love quadrangle between Qingcheng and the three male leads. Unfortunately, none of these characters seems to feel anything toward any other, except perhaps for the evil Duke, a crypto-homosexual figure (played to the hilt by Tse) who seems to hate everyone but nonetheless exhibits a fabulous fashion sense — he has a thing for feathers — and an impressive but deadly talent for fan work.

Although *The Promise* clearly follows the wuxia tradition of chivalric fable, none of the characters in Chen's film ever seems heroic, or even — apart from the innocent and lost Kunlun — honorable. Likewise, the grand ill-fated passions that are supposed to inform their otherwise nonsensical actions are never fully expressed to the viewers. This is not in any way a tale of daring and devotion. And the only character who seems to express much emotion at all is a sad-sack assassin called the Snow Wolf (Liu Ye), who looks more like a moulting crow with a serious case of the mopes.

This failure to connect emotionally to either the material or the audience is, I am sure, mostly the fault of the direction and writing of Chen and his co-scripter, Zhang

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Tan. However, some of the problem might lie in the trimming of approximately twenty minutes from the original film for its international release. (Not that I'm complaining, shorter is definitely better. At least in this case.)

In addition, Chen clearly made a calculated business move to bring in an international Asian cast to broaden the film's appeal throughout the Pacific Rim. Sanada is Japanese. Jang is Korean. And several of the other cast members are native Cantonese speakers from Hong Kong. I have heard tell that some of the actors struggled mightily with their Mandarin dialogue — to either the disconcertion or amusement of Chinese audiences. The struggle to get a comprehensible line reading out can certainly compromise an actor's performance, as it seems to have done here.

Chen, like every good businessman-filmmaker, has attempted to put a positive spin on his movie. Besides entertainment, he has told interviewers that he hopes that viewers leave his film feeling like "they had a spiritual shower." When I left the theater after viewing his tragic fable, I felt only relief. My eyes were dry, and so was my soul. Although I did regretfully conclude that Chen, himself, was all wet.

The filmmaker's countrymen were no more merciful. One of the biggest download hits of the web this past winter was a twenty-minute parody of the epic called *The Bloody Case that Started from a Steamed Bun* by a young blogger named Hu Ge.

The Promise's writer-director was not amused. In fact, he was so outraged that he is attempting to sue his satirist. But the gentleman from Beijing needs to understand that a big budget, cheesy special effects and a bloated and confusing story made from scraps of a dozen legends do not (as most Hollywood actioners aptly illustrate) make for a great movie. And the kind of ponderous pretension Chen exhibits in *The Promise* has no place in a vital genre like the martial arts film.

Perhaps Chen Kaige was merely a tool of the official Chinese film industry in its quest to create an all-things-for-all-people film product for the global marketplace. Perhaps this is even a Communist plot — Rummy, take note — of the Chinese government's attempt to eat Hollywood's lunch.

If they can't bury us in cheap plastic crap, maybe they'll settle for lulling us into submissiveness with dull and unfathomable action movies.

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Does anyone rival Texans when it comes to the tall tale? Everything's bigger in Texas, so doesn't it make sense that the biggest whoppers come from the Lone Star State? Naturalized Texan Carrie Richerson provides some evidence to the affirmative with this doozy of a yarn.

...~~With~~ By Good Intentions

By Carrie Richerson

"SO, MR. SANDOVAL — YOUR company has won the bid for my little project. I suppose I don't need to tell you that you had some...*fierce*...competition?" The client smiles at Roy.

A smile from the Big Man is a fearsome sight. It makes Roy want to run far, far away, very fast. Fortunately for his status as low-bidder on this project, certain portions of his anatomy are not cooperating. Inside his steel-capped work boots, all ten toes have begun to gibber and moan among themselves, and to try to slither back up inside his feet. (He is aware that other parts are trying to slither up inside elsewhere.) The toes are blocked in their efforts because the feet have swiftly and silently turned to stone. Rooted to the spot, Roy decides there is nothing to do but act like the professional he is.

"*Sí*, and I guarantee we'll bring this project in on time and within budget."

"You are aware, I trust, of the...*penalties*...that accrue for nonperformance?" Now the client is beaming. Fangs glint in the ruddy light.

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Ice crawls up Roy's legs to his knees, which begin to quiver like an underdone flan. He tries to imagine a steel rebar shoring up his spine so he does not simply fall to the simmering ground and scream.

"*Sí.* We'll be getting started now," he forces himself to say. "There's just one thing, *Señor*," he adds, as the Big Man starts to turn away.

"And that is...?" The client's tone is silky; the gaze he fixes on Roy could strip the flesh from his bones.

"You're required to supply me with a copy of the approved Environmental Impact Statement before we can start," Roy manages to choke out past a tongue that wants only to flap in abject terror.

"I'm *required*?" The Big Man is suddenly a lot bigger. A lot redder. A lot hotter. He looms over Roy like doom personified. He is almost as terrifying as Roy's *abuela*, Maria Luisa Carmina Portillo de Santiago, when she is voicing her *disappointment* in her grandson.

Steam rises from Roy's sodden clothes, but he plunges ahead. "*Sí.* Section 47 of the contract, page 64: 'Contractee agrees to obtain and provide contractor with certified approval of project from the Environmental Protection Agency, and any and all local approvals and licenses, before work can commence. Approved EIS must be available for public inspection at all times at the contractor's site headquarters. Failure of the contractee to obtain such approvals shall not be counted against contractor's performance. Failure to obtain such approvals within a timely fashion shall cause this contract to terminate without prejudice against contractor," Roy quotes from memory. He pulls his damp copy of the contract from his jacket pocket in case the client is not convinced.

The moment stretches out. The Big Man contemplates Roy, and Roy stares back, bug- and cross-eyed, unable even to wipe away the sweat that pours down his forehead. Then the client shrugs.

"I can see that you are indeed the right man for the job, Mr. Sandoval. Here is your copy of the EIS." He snaps his fingers and a thick document materializes in his hand. He hands it to Roy; fingerprints smolder in the margins.

Roy checks the EIS carefully. It has all the correct stamps and approvals, and is signed by the commissioner of the EPA herself. Somehow Roy is not surprised to see the Big Man has that kind of pull. Appended to the document are all the necessary local approvals and

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waivers. He is acutely aware of the client hovering impatiently over him as he reads the papers, in part because of the overpowering reek of sulfur coming off the client's body. For a moment he considers mentioning to the client that there are deodorants to help such a manly Big Man with body odor, then he thinks better of the idea.

"Everything appears to be in order, *Señor.*"

"Then you had better get started, hadn't you?" The client points a razored talon to the sun, already well above the eastern horizon. "Tick tock, Mr. Sandoval. Sundown on the seventh day comes apace." He vanishes in a cloud of fume and ash. Only a smoking hoofprint remains.

Roy gasps with relief and almost sags to the ground as his lower extremities unpetrify. He swings around and waves to his crew. "*¡Ándale, hombres!*" Dozens of diesel engines cough to life and begin to puff black exhaust into the clear morning air. The biggest 'dozer, under the command of Roy's gang boss Felipe, spins with almost dainty grace in a half circle and charges toward the survey flags marking the beginning of the route. The blade bangs down and bites into hardpan. Behind Felipe's 'dozer, a conga line of dump trucks, front-end loaders, spreaders, graders, and rollers forms up. Rock crushers, slurry mixers, water trucks, sprayers, asphalt cookers, and all the support vehicles — cooks' RV, first aid RV, Roy's office RV, and the bunk RVs needed for construction far from civilization — organize to the side. The project is underway.

Roy whistles over a dump truck and swings into the cab beside the driver. He has a project, a budget, a deadline. A most inflexible deadline.

The first two days they bust rock, tons and tons of it. The demolition crews rove ahead of the 'dozers, blowing the largest boulders and rock ledges apart. The bulldozers blade the beginnings of a roadway through the rubble while front-end loaders shovel the debris into dump trucks, which take it to the crushers. More trucks bring the crushed product back to the route, where spreaders and graders form it into road base. The work proceeds with practiced smoothness.

Roy employs the best demo expert in the business. It is widely acknowledged that Kath can trim dynamite sticks to the millimeter by eye, and juggle a dozen blasting caps at once, stone sober (which everyone knows is much harder than juggling them drunk). She brings the mountains low

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and levels valleys, makes the rough places smooth and plain as they follow the ruler-straight line of survey flags westward.

On the morning of the third day, out past Kingdom Come, Kath brings Roy the bad news. "Survey flags disappeared last night, boss."

Roy has been expecting trouble since the moment they started the project; he is almost relieved that something definite has finally happened so his stomach can stop winding itself in knots. This problem will be easy to solve; he expects more serious attempts at delay to follow.

"Get Jorge and his crew out there with the transit. And Kath — set guards tonight." She nods and goes off to rouse the surveyors and to unlock the armory.

The heat mounts by the hour, and by noon it is unbelievable. Roy makes sure his people have plenty to drink, but most shrug off the temperature. *No es nada*, they say, and work on stoically. Felipe pushes back his Stetson and spits into the dust. "This is nothin', *Jefe*. El Paso in July — now *that's muy caliente.*"

The afternoon brings a spot of good news. Roy's nephew, Ramón Benitez, brings him a sample of a new slurry. Ramón is Roy's sister's son, the first in the extended Sandoval *familia* to get a college degree. At Texas A&M University he studied chemical engineering and agronomy, and he is fond of saying "*El Dios* never made a better chemical engineering factory than the brown Jersey cow." His great ambition is to own a small dairy herd of his own; for now he makes Roy's job easier by constant tinkering with the many surfacing, binding, and weather-proofing chemicals used in paving operations.

He shows Roy a capped jar of thick, gray sludge, and a chunk of sulfurous, flaking rock. "It's this local brimstone, *Tío* Roy, from Hell's Half Acre. We can crush it and use it instead of fly ash. It saves us a lot of money, the slurry spreads easier, and sets up faster and harder." Roy examines the test plot. The reformulated slurry has set up into a smooth, hard surface full of tiny glittering flakes. "*¿Qué es?*" he asks.

"Iron pyrite, *Tío*. Fool's gold," Ramón answers.

Roy okays the change. It will save them more than money; it will save time they would have had to spend trucking in the fly ash from power plants back in East Texas. They start spreading the new slurry that afternoon. The first section will be ready to tar by the next morning.

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That night only a few survey flags disappear. Guards with rifles patrol the route, setting off road flares every few hundred feet. They report vague shapes skulking in the darkness just outside the circles of light, but only one sharpshooter connects with a target, and a skull-jangling howl greets his success. Morning reveals the corpse of a wolf-like creature four times the size of a Great Dane. "Hellhound," Kath says, pushing the animal's lip back with the barrel of her rifle to show a fang as long as her hand.

Kath brings the news to Roy, who is watching his tar boss roll on the first layer of asphalt sealer. Roy is an asphaltenophile, a connoisseur of heavy hydrocarbons. He knows his tars, from Athabascan bitumen to Trinidadian pitch. "I love the smell of asphalt in the morning," he tells Kath. "It smells like...progress." He is in too good a humor to be dismayed by Kath's report of the Hellhound. He agrees with her plan to handle the beasts if they return.

Roy has been running his crews in shifts from first light in the morning until full dark. He knows that toward the end, his people will have to work all night, under lights, but in these first days, he has let them get as much rest as possible for the sprint to come. It is during second shift lunch, right at noon on the fourth day, when the plague of snakes arrives.

They are rattlesnakes, sidewinders as long as gravel trucks and with hides armored like a Caterpillar. They bite two lunching workers and an assistant cook, while bullets from side arms and rifles bounce off harmlessly. The toll would be higher, but for their habit of coiling before a strike. As one huge head, jaws agape and fangs dripping corrosive venom, weaves back and forth above her, Kath pitches a lit stick of dynamite into the gullet. *BLAM!* When the smoke and the rain of snake parts clears away, so have the snakes. Deep scores in the rock show the fleeing trails. Roy sends scouts armed with RPGs after the surviving snakes. They destroy two more and report the rest have vanished.

Quick action in the emergency RV saves the workers' lives. Roy has had his medics stock up on Holy Water as well as antivenom for just such contingencies. He directs the cleanup of the site and the careful butchering of the remains of the snakes. That evening the workers feast on rattlesnake *fajitas*, with mounds of corn tortillas and roasted *chiles*. "*¡Delicioso!*" They salute the cooks. "¡Tastes like *pollo!*"

That night the Hellhounds return, but this time Kath has sent her

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teams out equipped with night-vision goggles, laser sights, and teflon-coated bullets. All night long Roy's dreams are punctuated with the crack of rifle fire, and in the morning he swings up the side of a dump truck to view a reeking pile of carcasses. "Treat them like *el coyote*," he tells Kath.

Ramón has come to report on the progress of his asphalt crews and overhears Roy's instruction. "What is she going to do with them, *Tío* Roy?"

"Wait and see, nephew."

A few hours later, Roy stops his pickup beside the canopy where Ramón has set up his headquarters for the day. As the radio dispatcher coordinates asphalt spreaders and rollers, Roy opens the truck door and motions Ramón inside. "Come, nephew. Let us ride the route and see how work is progressing."

Behind the asphalt team, at the beginning of the route, crews are already building forms for the concrete, while at the far end of the route, the slurry teams are finishing the road base. Every few miles, Kath's hunters have hung up a Hellhound carcass beside the roadway. "Is that what you meant, *Tío*?"

"*Sí*. With *el coyote*, you kill one and hang him up in the yard to warn the others. Figure it will work with Hellhounds, too. Remember this, nephew, for when you run the company — though let us hope you never have a project like *this*." Roy grins at his nephew, then turns serious. "Ramón, even if we survive this, your mother my sister may never speak to me again for bringing you onto this project. If we fail, we lose everything — not just our lives, but our very hope of *Paraíso*."

Ramón squints into the sun dazzle out the windshield. "We won't fail, *Tío* Roy. This is the best road-building crew ever assembled, and they know what we stand to win. We won't fail you."

Roy drops Ramón back at his dispatch hut. "We work the night through, nephew. Tell your people."

"*Sí, Tío* Roy."

That night, as the asphalt crews hasten to seal the road base ahead of the form construction teams, swarms of vampire bats, so thick they blot out the stars, swoop down to feast. But the cooks have been adding bushels of garlic to the daily *menudo* and *posole*, and the bats flutter away in confusion. The ultrasonic cries of so many might have damaged the

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workers' hearing, but Roy has told his bosses to enforce the rule requiring earplugs on the job. At the height of the attack, Felipe turns on the ultra-high-frequency broadcaster. Stunned bats rain from the sky; the crews kick them off the roadway and work on.

Ramón asks Roy, "Why didn't Felipe turn the power high enough to kill them, *Tío*?"

Roy sips his coffee and smiles. "Think, nephew. Where do we get most of our paving contracts? From the Legislature in Austin. We don't need to acquire a bad reputation with those bat-huggers."

Just before dawn, Roy sends everyone but the forms construction teams for a few hours' sleep. As the sun rises he sees maroon and purple clouds massing overhead. He tells the foremen to mount rain canopies over the RVs and heavy equipment and to move all other vehicles and tools under shelter. Then he turns in for a few hours of sleep himself.

The rain of blood begins midmorning and continues all day. Under the canopies they have fashioned from the Hellsnake skins, the concrete crews begin pouring. Roy and the sleeping workers are lulled by the patter and hiss of smoking drops on the impervious hides.

By early afternoon Roy wakes. He dons a chemical protection suit to go out into the bloody downpour to check the progress of the pour. They are using a quick-setting formulation of Portland cement and crushed brimstone that would harden even under water; the rain of blood has no effect on it except to tint the topmost layer a bright pink. Roy chats with the workers for a time as they swing the concrete chutes about and level and smooth the slabs. They swap stories of rains of blood past.

"I was in a hurricane of blood once in Veracruz...."

"That's nothing! I was in a blood tornado!"

"My *abuelo* told me he was working cattle on a *rancho* near Harlingen once when there was a flash blood flood, and that's how come Santa Gertrudis cattle are red."

By nightfall the blood eases off to a drizzle and by midnight it is over. Felipe reports to Roy that the first aid unit has treated a few burns, and everyone has a headache from the noxious smell, but no equipment has been lost, and they are still on the timetable.

"Rain of blood — *no problemo, Jefe.* Now a rain of frogs — *that* would have been nasty!"

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All night and all the next morning the concrete crews pour slabs, while the finishers follow behind smoothing, edging, cutting expansion joints and filling them with asphalt so the concrete can expand and contract through the blazing days and freezing nights without heaving. The construction teams, having finished making concrete forms, start building the tollbooths and toll plaza.

By the time lunch is over, the concrete work is done, there have been no more problems, and Roy is getting more and more tense as he anticipates some further disaster. Only the finish work is left. The stripers load up with paint and start out at one o'clock. Behind them, crews set the adhesive reflectors to mark the roadway center lines and lane lines. The construction teams finish the tollbooths and the electronics crew installs and tests the automatic toll counters.

We are going to make it, Roy thinks, as he watches the sun slide down the sky. *We are going to win the biggest payoff of all.*

And then Felipe is at his side. "*Jefe*, we gotta problem."

No, thinks Roy. *Not now. Now when we were so close.*

"It's the striping paint, *Jefe*, the midline yellow. We were running low, so I sent some boys to the depot in Lubbock. The supplier was out, said somebody came in yesterday and bought up every barrel. And there's no time to order some delivered from Houston."

"How much do we need?"

"I figure we'll be short only about a hundred and fifty feet. About two quarts."

One hundred and fifty feet, Roy thinks. *It might as well be a mile. Or the distance between Paraíso and Infierno.*

Roy looks at the sun. The bottom edge of the disc is touching the horizon. A sulfurous wind is rising, and inside his head he hears a vast voice intone softly, *Tick, tock.*

He has never failed to bring a project in on time. He isn't going to start now. "Follow me!" he yells at Felipe as he swings into his pickup and floors it, racing for the striper as it approaches the end of the route.

He slams to a stop behind the slow-moving machine and swings up onto the fender. At his gesture, Felipe jumps up beside him. Roy pries the lid off the paint reservoir; the last dregs of yellow paint are draining toward the outlet to the roller. "Steady me," Roy orders Felipe as he yanks his

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edging tool from his belt. He shoves his arm into the reservoir and slashes open his wrist.

"Keep going!" Felipe yells to the driver as yellow fluid pours out of Roy's arm into the reservoir. Roy wraps his free arm around a handhold and leans over the reservoir. "Whatever happens," he tells Felipe, "don't stop short."

DISTANT VOICES float through the blackness. "*Tío* Roy, can you hear me? Is he going to be okay, Felipe?"

"Sure, *muchacho*. A few days of your *mamá's barbacoa* and some *cervezas*, he'll be *bien*. *El tigre*, that's your *tío*."

The blackness is starting to lighten to gray. Roy can feel he is lying down; something cold is being pressed to his forehead.

Then there is another voice, and Roy must, now *must*, open his eyes.

"Well, well, Mr. Sandoval. That was very clever of you. It was something I did not anticipate, and that is saying a lot."

There is a crowd around him, but Roy knows the owner of that voice. "All Sandovals bleed highway-marking yellow, *Señor*. Paving is in our blood. Help me up," he says to his crew. Ramón protests, but Felipe and Kath shush him and haul Roy to his feet.

Roy feels as empty as a broken *piñata*. Someone has bound his wrist tightly with a bandana. He leans on Felipe and raises his eyes anxiously to the horizon — the last sliver of a scarlet sun disappears as he looks.

"Yes, Mr. Sandoval. You have completed the project as per the specifications. Your payment is being credited to your account even as we speak."

Roy straightens and turns to look at the client. The Big Man does not look happy, but now Roy is not afraid.

"And our bonus?" he asks.

"Here." The client hands over a thick sheaf of documents. "'Get Out Of Hell Free' passes for everyone on your crew. And their families. Now I suggest you had all better be going, while I am still in the mood to honor our contract."

The heavy equipment and RVs are waiting for Roy's signal. The first souls are already lining up at the tollbooths. As each passes through, a sepulchral wail rings out.

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Roy turns to leave, then turns back. "If I may ask one question, *Señor*."

The client glowers. "One."

"Why a divided six-lane superhighway? There's not going to be any return traffic, *no*?"

The Big Man regards Roy as dispassionately as though he is just another mote already broiling in Hell's infernos. "I appreciate the irony, Mr. Sandoval." He turns to watch the ever-lengthening lines at the tollbooths. "I expect my...guests...will appreciate it also, though not perhaps with the same pleasure. Now go." He stamps a hoof and disappears with a sulfurous blast.

"*Vaya con Dios, Señor*," Roy whispers, "though you would not thank me to hear me say it."

Roy turns to his crew crowded around, and his heart swells with pride in these men and women. "*¡Vamanos con Dios, amigos!*" he cries, lifting the sheaf of passes into the air. Cheering, whistling, and clapping greet his announcement before the crew scatters to their vehicles.

The conga line forms up again, heading back to civilization. Roy limps to Felipe's pickup and climbs wearily into the passenger seat. As the truck joins the end of the line of departing machinery, Roy turns to take what he trusts will be his last look at the entrance ramp to Hell. Someone on the crew has taken the time to erect the customary project notification:

THIS CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT PROJECT COMPLETED BY:
SANDOVAL PAVING CO.
ROY SANDOVAL, PROP.
YOUR TAX DOLLARS AT WORK

Someone has crossed out the "Sandoval" before "Paving" and carefully lettered "*Buenos Intenciones*." Roy laughs, and Felipe raises an eyebrow at him. "Want me to fix it, *Jefe*?"

"Hell, no!" Roy says. "I think I'll change it permanently!"

Felipe grins. "*¡No problemo!*" he whoops and floors the accelerator.

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Paolo Bacigalupi lives in western Colorado and works for the High Country News. *His previous stories for us include The Fluted Girl," "The People of Sand and Slag," and "The Calorie Man" (which recently won the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award). His new story is grim and unflinching and might not be appropriate for younger or more sensitive readers (parents, this one's probably not as good a choice to read with your kids) but we think most of you are going to find it potent stuff.*

Pop Squad

By Paolo Bacigalupi

THE FAMILIAR STENCH OF unwashed bodies, cooked food, and shit washes over me as I come through the door. Cruiser lights flicker through the blinds, sparkling in rain and illuminating the crime scene with strobes of red and blue fire. A kitchen. A humid mess. A chunky woman huddles in the corner, clutching closed her nightgown. Fat thighs and swaying breasts under stained silk. Squad goons crowding her, pushing her around, making her sit, making her cower. Another woman, young-looking and pretty, pregnant and black-haired, is slumped against the opposite wall, her blouse spackled with spaghetti remains. Screams from the next room: kids.

I squeeze my fingers over my nose and breathe through my mouth, fighting off nausea as Pentle wanders in, holstering his Grange. He sees me and tosses me a nosecap. I break it and snort lavender until the stink slides off. Children come scampering in with Pentle, a brood of three tangling around his knees — the screamers from the other room. They gallop around the kitchen and disappear again, screaming still, into the living

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room where data sparkles like fairy dust on the wallscreens and provides what is likely their only connection to the outside world.

"That's everyone," Pentle says. He's got a long skinny face and a sour small mouth that always points south. Weights seem to hang off his cheeks. Fat caterpillar brows droop over his eyes. He surveys the kitchen, mouth corners dragging lower. It's always depressing to come into these scenes. "They were all inside when we broke down the door."

I nod absently as I shake monsoon water from my hat. "Great. Thanks." Liquid beads scatter on the floor, joining puddles of wet from the pop squad along with the maggot debris of the spaghetti dinner. I put my hat back on. Water still manages to drip off the brim and slip under my collar, a slick rivulet of discomfort. Someone closes the door to the outside. The shit smell thickens, eggy and humid. The nosecap barely holds it off. Old peas and bits of cereal crunch under my feet. They squish with the spaghetti, the geologic layers of past feedings. The kitchen hasn't been self-cleaned in years.

The older woman coughs and pulls her nightgown tighter around her cellulite and I wonder, as I always do when I come into situations like this, what made her choose this furtive nasty life of rotting garbage and brief illicit forays into daylight. The pregnant girl seems to have slipped even further into herself since I arrived. She stares into space. You'd have to touch her pulse to know that she's alive. It amazes me that women can end up like this, seduced so far down into gutter life that they arrive here, fugitives from everyone who would have kept them and held them and loved them and let them see the world outside.

The children run in from the living room again, playing chase: a blond, no more than five; another, younger and with brown braids, topless and in makeshift diapers, less than three; and a knee-high toddler boy, scrap diaper bunched around little muscle thighs, wearing a T-shirt stained with tomato sauce that says, "Who's the Cutest?" The T-shirt would be an antique if it wasn't stained.

"You need anything else?" Pentle asks. He wrinkles his nose as new reek wafts from the direction of the kids.

"You get photos for the prosecutor?"

"Got 'em." Pentle holds out a digicam and thumbs through the images of the ladies and the three children, all of them staring out from

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the screen like little smeared dolls. "You want me to take them in, now?"

I look over the women. The kids have run out again. From the other room, their howls echo as they chase around. Their shrieks are piercing. Even from a distance they hurt my head. "Yeah. I'll deal with the kids."

Pentle gets the women up off the floor and shuffles out the door, leaving me standing alone in the middle of the kitchen. It's all so familiar: a typical floor plan from Builders United. Custom undercab lighting, black mirror tile on the floors, clever self-clean nozzles hidden behind deco trim lines, so much like the stuff Alice and I have that I can almost forget where I am. It's a negative image of our apartment's kitchen: light vs. dark, clean vs. dirty, quiet vs. loud. The same floor plan, everything about it the same, and yet, nothing in it is. It's archeological. I can look at the layers of gunk and grime and noise and see what must have underlain it before...when these people worried about color coordinating and classy appliances.

I open the fridge (smudgefree nickel, how practical). Ours contains pineapples and avocados and endive and corn and coffee and brazil nuts from Angel Spire's hanging gardens. This one holds a shelf cluttered with ground mycoprotein bars and wadded piles of nutrition supplement sacs like the kind they hand out at the government rejoo clinics. Other than a bag of slimy lettuce, there isn't anything unprocessed in the fridge at all. No vegetables except in powder jars, ditto for fruit. A stack of self-warming dinner bins for fried rice and laap and spaghetti just like the one still lying on the kitchen table in a puddle of its own sauce, and that's it.

I close the fridge and straighten. There's something here in the mess and the screaming in the next room and the reek of the one kid's poopy pants, but I'm stumped as to what it is. They could have lived up in the light and air. Instead, they hid in the dark under wet jungle canopy and turned pale and gave up their lives.

The kids race back in, chasing each other all in a train, laughing and shrieking. They stop and look around, surprised, maybe, that their moms have disappeared. The littlest one has a stuffed dinosaur by the nose. It's got a long green neck and a fat body. A brontosaurus, I think, with big cartooney eyes and black felt lashes. It's funny about the dinosaur, because they've been gone so long, but here one is, showing up as a stuffed

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toy. And then it's funny again, because when you think about it, a dinosaur toy is really extinct twice.

"Sorry, kids. Mommy's gone."

I pull out my Grange. Their heads kick back in successive jerks, bang bang bang down the line, holes appearing on their foreheads like paint and their brains spattering out the back. Their bodies flip and skid on the black mirror floor. They land in jumbled piles of misaligned limbs. For a second, gunpowder burn makes the stench bearable.

UP OUT OF THE JUNGLE like a bat out of hell, climbing out of Rhinehurst Supercluster's holdout suburban sprawl and then rising through jungle overstory. Blasting across the Causeway toward Angel Spire and the sea. Monkeys diving off the rail line like grasshoppers, pouring off the edge ahead of my cruiser and disappearing into the mangrove and kudzu and mahogany and teak, disappearing into the wet bowels of greenery tangle. Dumping the cruiser at squad center, no time for mopdown, don't need it anyway. My hat, my raincoat, my clothes, into hazmat bags, and then out again on the other side, rushing to pull on a tux before catching a masslift up 188 stories, rising into the high clear air over the jungle fur of carbon sequestration project N22.

Mma Telogo has a new concerto. Alice is his diva viola, his prize, and Hua Chiang and Telogo have been circling her like ravens, picking apart her performance, corvid eyes on her, watching and hungry for fault, but now they call her ready. Ready to banish Banini from his throne. Ready to challenge for a place in the immortal canon of classical performance. And I'm late. Caught in a masslift on Level 55, packed in with the breath and heat of upper-deck diners and weekenders climbing the spire while the seconds tick by, listening to the climate fans buzz and whir while we all sweat and wilt, waiting for some problem on the line to clear.

Finally we're rising again, our stomachs dropping into our shoes, our ears popping as we soar into the heavens, flying under magnetic acceleration...and then slowing so fast we almost leave the floor. Our stomachs catch up. I shove out through hundreds of people, waving my cop badge when anyone complains, and sprint through the glass arch of the

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Ki Performance Center. I dive between the closing slabs of the attention doors.

The autolocks thud home behind me, sealing the performance space. It's comforting. I'm inside, enfolded in the symphony, as though its hands have cupped themselves around me and pulled me into a chamber of absolute focus. The lights dim. Conversational thrum falls away. I find my way to my seat more by feel than sight. Dirty looks from men in topaz hats and women in spectacle eyes as I squeeze across them. Gauche, I know. Absurdly late to an event that happens once in a decade. Plopping down just as Hua Chiang steps up to the podium.

His hands rise like crane wings. Bows and horns and flutes flash with movement and then the music comes, first a hint, like blowing mist, and then building, winding through a series of repeated stanzas that I have heard Alice play perhaps ten thousand times. Notes I heard first so long ago, stumbling and painful, that now spill like water and burst like ice flowers. The music settles, pianissimo again, the lovely delicate motifs that I know from Alice's practice. An introduction only, she has told me, intended to file away the audience's last thoughts of the world outside, repeated stanzas until Hua Chiang accepts that the audience is completely his and then Alice's viola rises, and the other players move to support her, fifteen years of practice coming to fruition.

I look down at my hands, overwhelmed. It's different in the concert hall. Different than all those days when she cursed and practiced and swore at Telogo and claimed his work couldn't be performed. Different even from when she finished her practices early, smiling, hands calloused in new ways, face flushed, eager to drink a cool white wine with me on our balcony in the light of the setting sun and watch the sky as monsoon clouds parted and starlight shone down on our companionship. Tonight, her part joins the rest of the symphony and I can't speak or think for the beauty of the whole.

Later, I'll hear whether Telogo has surpassed Banini for sheer audacity. I'll hear how critics compare living memories of ancient performances and see how critical opinion shifts to accommodate this new piece in a canon that stretches back more than a century, and that hangs like a ghost over everything that Alice and her director Hua Chiang hope for: a performance that will knock Banini off his throne and perhaps depress

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him enough to stop rejoo and stuff him in his grave. For me, competing against that much history would be a heavy weight. I'm glad I've got a job where forgetting is the most important part. Working on the pop squad means your brain takes a vacation and your hands do the work. And when you leave work, you've left it for good.

Except now, as I look down at my hands, I'm surprised to find pinpricks of blood all over them. A fine spray. The misty remains of the little kid with the dinosaur. My fingers smell of rust.

The tempo accelerates. Alice is playing again. Notes writhe together so fluidly that it seems impossible they aren't generated electronically, and yet the warmth and phrasing is hers, achingly hers, I've heard it in the morning, when she practiced on the balcony, testing herself, working again and again against the limitations of her self. Disciplining her fingers and hands, forcing them to accept Telogo's demands, the ones that years ago she had called impossible and which now run so cleanly through the audience.

The blood is all over my hands. I pick at it, scrape it away in flakes. It had to be the kid with the dinosaur. He was closest when he took the bullet. Some of his residue is stuck tight, bonded to my own skin. I shouldn't have skipped mopdown.

I pick.

The man next to me, tan face and rouged lips, frowns. I'm ruining a moment of history for him, something he has waited years to hear.

I pick more carefully. Silently. The blood flakes off. Dumb kid with the dumb dinosaur that almost made me miss the performance.

The cleanup crew noticed the dinosaur toy too. Caught the irony. Joked and snorted nosecaps and started bagging the bodies for compost. Made me late. Stupid dinosaur.

The music cascades into silence. Hua Chiang's hands fall. Applause. Alice stands at Chiang's urging and the applause increases. Craning my neck, I can see her, nineteen-year-old face flushed, smile bright and triumphant, enveloped in our adulation.

We end up at a party thrown by Maria Illoni, one of the symphony's high donors. She made her money on global warming mitigation for New York City, before it went under. Her penthouse is in Shoreline Curve,

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daringly arcing over the seawalls and the surf, a sort of flip of the finger to the ocean that beat her storm surge calculations. A spidery silver vine over dark water and the bob of the boat communities out in the deeps. New York obviously never got its money back: Illoni's outdoor patio runs across the entire top floor of the Shoreline and platforms additional petals of spun hollowform carbon out into the air.

From the far side of the Curve, you can see beyond the incandescent cores of the superclusters to the old city sprawl, dark except along where maglines radiate. A strange mangle of wreckage and scavenge and disrepair. In the day, it looks like some kind of dry red fungal collapse, a weave of jungle canopy and old suburban understory, but at night, all that's visible is the skeleton of glowing infrastructure, radial blooms in the darkness, and I breathe deeply, enjoying all the freshness and openness that's missing from those steaming hideouts I raid with the pop squad.

Alice sparkles in the heat, perfectly slim, well curved — an armful of beautiful girl. The fall air is under thirty-three degrees and pleasant, and I feel infinitely tender toward her. I pull her close. We slip into a forest of century-old bonsai sculptures created by Maria's husband. Alice murmurs that he spends all his time here on the roof, staring at branches, studying their curves, and occasionally, perhaps every few years, wiring a branch and guiding it in a new direction. We kiss in the shadows they provide, and Alice is beautiful and everything is perfect.

But I'm distracted.

When I hit the kids with my Grange, the littlest one — the one with that stupid dinosaur — flipped over. A Grange is built for nitheads, not little kids, so the bullet plowed through the kid and he flipped and his dinosaur went flying. It sailed, I mean really sailed, through the air. And now I can't get it out of my mind: that dinosaur flying. And then hitting the wall and bouncing onto the black mirror floor. So fast and so slow. Bang bang bang down the line...and then the dinosaur in the air.

Alice pulls away, seeming to sense my inattention. I straighten up. Try to focus on her.

She says, "I thought you weren't going to make it. When we were tuning, I looked out and your seat was empty."

I force a grin. "But I did. I made it."

Barely. I stood around too long with the cleanup guys while the

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dinosaur lay in a puddle and sopped up the kid's blood. Double extinct. The kid and the dinosaur both. Dead one way, and then dead again. There's a weird symmetry there.

She cocks her head, studying me. "Was it bad?"

"What?" *The brontosaurus*? "The call?" I shrug. "Just a couple crazy ladies. Not armed or anything. It was easy."

"I can't imagine it. Cutting rejoo like that." She sighs and reaches out to touch a bonsai, perfectly guided over the decades by the map that only Micheal Illoni can see or understand. "Why give all this up?"

I don't have an answer. I rewind the crime scene in my mind. I have the same feeling that I did when I stood on spaghetti maggots and went through their fridge. There's something there in the stink and noise and darkness, something hot and obsessive and ripe. But I don't know what it is.

"The ladies looked old," I say. "Like week-old balloons, all puffy and droopy."

Alice makes a face of distaste. "Can you imagine trying to perform Telogo without rejoo? We wouldn't have had the time. Half of us would have been past our prime, and we'd have needed understudies, and then the understudies would have had to find understudies. Fifteen years. And these women throw it all away. How can they throw away something as beautiful as Telogo?"

"You thinking about Kara?"

"She would have played Telogo twice as well as I did."

"I don't believe that."

"Believe it. She was the best. Before she went kid-crazy." She sighs. "I miss her."

"You could still visit her. She's not dead yet."

"She might as well be. She's already twenty years older than when we knew her." She shakes her head. "No. I'd rather remember her in her prime, not out at some single-sex work camp growing vegetables and losing the last of her talent. I couldn't stand listening to her play now. It would kill me to hear all of that gone." She turns abruptly. "That reminds me, my rejoo booster is tomorrow. Can you take me?"

"Tomorrow?" I hesitate. I'm supposed to be on another shift popping kids. "It's kind of short notice."

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"I know. I meant to ask sooner, but with the concert coming up, I forgot." She shrugs. "It's not that important. I can go by myself." She glances at me sidelong. "But it is nicer when you come."

What the hell. I don't really want to work anyway. "Okay, sure. I'll get Pentle to cover for me." Let him deal with the dinosaurs.

"Really?"

I shrug. "What can I say? I'm a sweet guy."

She smiles and stands on tiptoe to kiss me. "If we weren't going to live forever, I'd marry you."

I laugh. "If we weren't going to live forever, I'd get you pregnant."

We look at each other. Alice laughs unsteadily and takes it as a joke. "Don't be gross."

Before we can talk any more, Illoni pops out from behind a bonsai and grabs Alice by the arm. "There you are! I've been looking everywhere for you. You can't hide yourself like this. You're the woman of the hour."

She pulls Alice away with all the confidence that must have made New York believe she could save it. She barely even looks at me as they hustle off. Alice smiles tolerantly and motions for me to follow. Then Maria's calling to everyone and pulling them all together and she climbs up on a fountain's rim and pulls Alice up beside her. She starts talking about art and sacrifice and discipline and beauty.

I tune it out. There's only so much self-congratulation you can take. It's obvious Alice is one of the best in the world. Talking about it just makes it seem banal. But the donors need to feel like they're part of the moment, so they all want to squeeze Alice and make her theirs, so they talk and talk and talk.

Maria's saying, "...wouldn't be standing here congratulating ourselves, if it weren't for our lovely Alice. Hua Chiang and Telogo did their work well, but in the final moment it was Alice's execution in the face of Telogo's ambitious piece that has made it resonate so strongly already with the critics. We have her to thank for the piece's flawlessness."

Everyone starts applauding and Alice blushes prettily, not accustomed to adulation from her peers and competitors. Maria shouts over the cheering, "I've made several calls to Banini, and it is more than apparent that he has no answer to our challenge and so I expect the next eighty years are ours. And Alice's!" The applause is almost deafening.

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Maria waves for attention again and the applause fades into scattered whistles and catcalls which finally taper off enough to allow Maria to continue. "To commemorate the end of Banini's age, and the beginning of a new one, I would like to present Alice with a small token of affection — " and here she leans down and picks up a jute woven gift bag shot with gold as she says, "Of course a woman likes gold and jewels, and strings for her viola, but I thought this was a particularly apt gift for the evening...."

I'm leaning against the woman next to me, trying to see, as Maria holds the bag dramatically above her head and calls out to the crowd, "For Alice, our slayer of *dinosaurs*!" and pulls the green brontosaurus out of the bag.

It's just like the one the kid had.

Its big eyes look right at me. For a second it seems to blink at me with its big black lashes and then the crowd laughs and applauds as they all get the joke. *Banini* = *dinosaur*. Ha ha.

Alice takes the dinosaur and holds it by the neck and swings it over her head and everybody laughs again but I can't see anything anymore because I'm lying on the ground caught in the jungle swelter of people's legs and I can't breathe.

"ARE YOU SURE you're okay?"

"Sure. No problem. I told you. I'm fine."

It's true, I guess. Sitting next to Alice in the waiting room, I don't feel dizzy or anything, even if I am tired. Last night, she put the dinosaur on the bedside table, right in with her collection of little jeweled music boxes, and the damn thing looked at me all night long. Finally at four A.M. I couldn't stand it anymore and I shoved it under the bed. But in the morning, she found it and put it back, and it's been looking at me ever since.

Alice squeezes my hand. The rejoo clinic's a small one, private, carefully appointed with holographic windows of sailboats on the Atlantic so it feels open and airy even though its daylight is piped in through mirror collectors. It's not one of the big public monsters out in the clusters that got started after rejoo's patents expired. You pay a little more than you do for the Medicaid generics, but you don't rub shoulders with a bunch of starving gamblers and nitheads and drunks who all still want their rejoo even if they're wasting every day of their endless lives.

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The nurses are quick and efficient. Pretty soon, Alice is on her back hooked up to an IV bladder with me sitting beside her on the bed, and we're watching rejoo push into her.

It's just a clear liquid. I always thought it should be fizzy and green for growing things. Or maybe not green, but definitely fizzy. It always feels fizzy when it goes in.

Alice takes a quick breath and reaches out for me, her slender pale fingers brushing my thigh. "Hold my hand."

The elixir of life pulses into her, filling her, flushing her. She pants shallowly. Her eyes dilate. She isn't watching me anymore. She's somewhere deep inside, reclaiming what was lost over the last eighteen months. No matter how many times I do it, I'm surprised when I watch it come over someone, the way it seems to swallow them and then they come back to the surface more whole and alive than when they started.

Alice's eyes focus. She smiles. "Oh, God. I can never get used to that."

She tries to stand up, but I hold her down and beep the nurse. Once we've got her unhooked, I lead her back out to the car. She leans heavily against me, stumbling and touching me. I can almost feel the fizzing and tingling through her skin. She climbs into the car. When I'm inside, she looks over at me and laughs. "I can't believe how good I feel."

"Nothing like winding back the clock."

"Take me home. I want to be with you."

I push the start button on the car and we slide out of our parking space. We hook onto the magline out of Center Spire. Alice watches the city slide by outside the windows. All the shoppers and the businessmen and the martyrs and the ghosts, and then we're out in the open, on the high track over the jungle, speeding north again, for Angel Spire.

"It's so wonderful to be alive," she says, "It doesn't make any sense."

"What doesn't?"

"Cutting rejoo."

"If people made sense, we wouldn't have psychologists." And we wouldn't buy dinosaur toys for kids who were never going to make it anyway. I grit my teeth. None of them make any sense. Stupid moms.

Alice sighs and runs her hands across her thighs, kneading herself, hiking up her skirt and digging her fingers into her flesh. "But it still

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doesn't make any sense. It feels so *good*. You'd have to be crazy to stop rejoo."

"Of course they're crazy. They kill themselves, they make babies they don't know how to take care of, they live in shitty apartments in the dark, they never go out, they smell bad, they look terrible, they never have anything good again — " I'm starting to shout. I shut my mouth.

Alice looks over at me. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

But I'm not. I'm mad. Mad at the ladies and their stupid toy-buying. Pissed off that these dumb women tease their dumb terminal kids like that; treat them like they aren't going to end up as compost. "Let's not talk about work right now. Let's just go home." I force a grin. "I've already got the day off. We should take advantage of it."

Alice is still looking at me. I can see the questions in her eyes. If she weren't on the leading edge of a rejoo high, she'd keep pressing, but she's so wrapped up in the tingling of her rebuilt body that she lets it go. She laughs and runs her fingers up my leg and starts to play with me. I override the magline's safeties with my cop codes and we barrel across the Causeway toward Angel Spire with the sun on the ocean and Alice smiling and laughing and the bright air whirling around us.

THREE A.M. Another call, windows down, howling through the humidity and swelter of Newfoundland. Alice wants me to come home, come back, relax, but I can't. I don't want to. I'm not sure what I want, but it's not brunch with Belgian waffles or screwing on the living room floor or a trip to the movies or...anything, really.

I can't do it, anyway. We got home, and I couldn't do it. Nothing felt right. Alice said it didn't matter, that she wanted to practice.

Now I haven't seen her for more than a day.

I've been on duty, catching up on calls. I've been going for twenty-four hours straight, powered on coppers'-little-helpers and mainlined caffeine and my hat and trench coat and hands are pinprick-sprayed with the residue of work.

Along the coastline the sea runs high and hot, splashing in over the breakwaters. Lights ahead, the glow of coalfoundries and gasification

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works. The call takes me up the glittering face of Palomino Cluster. Nice real estate. Up the masslifts and smashing through a door with Pentle backing me, knowing what we're going to find but never knowing how much these ones will fight.

Bedlam. A lady, this one a pretty brown girl who might have had a great life if she didn't decide she needed a baby, and a kid lying in the corner in a box screaming and screaming. And the lady's screaming too, screaming at the little kid in its box, like she's gone out of her mind.

As we come in through the door, she starts screaming at us. The kid keeps screaming. The lady keeps screaming. It's like a bunch of screwdrivers jamming in my ears; it goes on and on. Pentle grabs the lady and tries to hold her but she and the kid just keep screaming away and suddenly I can't breathe. I can barely stand. The kid screams and screams and screams: screwdrivers and glass and icepicks in my head.

So I shoot the thing. I pull out my Grange and put a bullet in the little sucker. Fragments of box and baby spray the air.

I don't do that, normally; it's against procedure to waste the kid in front of the mother.

But there we all are, staring at the body, bloodmist and gunpowder all over and my ears ringing from the shot and for one pristine crystal second, it's quiet.

Then the woman's screaming at me again and Pentle's screaming too because I screwed up the evidence before he could get a picture, and then the lady's all over me, trying to claw my eyes out. Pentle drags her off and then she's calling me a bastard and a killer and bastard and monkey man and a fucking pig and that I've got dead eyes.

And that really gets me: I've got dead eyes. This lady's headed into a rejoo collapse and won't last another twenty years and she'll spend all of it in a single-sex work camp. She's young, a lot like Alice, maybe the last of them to cross the line into rejoo, right when she came of age — not an old workhorse like me who was already forty when it went generic — and now she'll be dead in an eye blink. But I'm the one with dead eyes.

I take my Grange and shove it into her forehead. "You want to die too?"

"Go ahead! Do it! Do it!" She doesn't stop for a second, just keeps howling and spitting. "Fucking bastard! Bastard fuckingfuckfucking—Do it! Do it!" She's crying.

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Even though I want to see her brains pop out the back of her head, I don't have the heart. She'll die soon enough. Another twenty years and she's done for. The paperwork isn't worth it.

Pentle cuffs her while she babbles to the baby in the box, just a lump of blood and limp doll parts now. "My baby my poor baby I didn't know I'm sorry my baby my poor baby I'm sorry...." Pentle muscles her out to the car.

For a while I can hear her in the hall. *My baby my poor baby my poor baby....* And then she's gone down the lifts and it's a relief just to be standing there with the wet smells of the apartment and the dead body.

She was using a dresser drawer as her bassinet.

I run my fingers along the splintered edge, fondle the brass pulls. If nothing else, these ladies are resourceful, making the things we can't buy anymore. If I close my eyes, I can almost remember a whole industry around these little guys. Little outfits. Little chairs. Little beds. Everything made little.

Little dinosaurs.

"She couldn't make it shut up."

I jerk my hands away from the baby box, startled. Pentle has come up behind me. "Huh?"

"She couldn't make it stop crying. Didn't know what to do with it. Didn't know how to make it calm down. That's how the neighbors heard."

"Dumb."

"Yeah. She didn't even have a tag-teamer. How the heck was she going to do grocery shopping?"

He gets out his camera and tries a couple shots of the baby. There's not a whole lot left. A 12mm Grange is built for junkies, nitheads going crazy, 'bot assassins. It's overkill for an unarmored thing like this. When the new Granges came out, Grange ran an ad campaign on the sides of our cruisers. "Grange: Unstoppable." Or something like that. There was this one that said "Point Blank Grange" with a photo of a completely mangled nithead. That one was in all our lockers.

Pentle tries another angle on the drawer, going for a profile, trying to make the best of a bad situation. "I like how she used a drawer," he says.

"Yeah. Resourceful."

"I saw this one where the lady made a whole little table and chair set

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for her kid. Handmade it all. I couldn't believe how much energy she put into it." He makes shapes with his hand. "Little scalloped edges, shapes painted on the top: squares and triangles and things."

"If you're going to die doing something, I guess you want to do a good job of it."

"I'd rather be parasailing. Or go to a concert. I heard Alice was great the other night."

"Yeah. She was." I study the baby's body as Pentle takes some more shots. "If you had to do it, how do you think you'd make one of them be quiet?"

Pentle nods at my Grange. "I'd tell it to shut up."

I grimace and holster the gun. "Sorry about that. It's been a rough week. I've been up too long. Haven't been sleeping." *Too many dinosaurs looking at me.*

Pentle shrugs. "Whatever. It would have been better to get an intact image — " He snaps another picture. " — but even if she gets off this time, you got to figure in another year or two we'll be busting down her door again. These girls have a damn high recidivism." He takes another photo.

I go to a window and open it. Salt air flows in like fresh life, cleaning out the wet shit and body stinks. Probably the first fresh air the apartment's had since the baby was born. Got to keep the windows closed or the neighbors might hear. Got to stay locked in. I wonder if she's got a boyfriend, some rejoo dropout who's going to show up with groceries and find her gone. Probably worth staking out the apartment, just to see. Keep the feminists off us for only bagging the women. I take a deep breath of sea air to get something fresh in my lungs, then light a cigarette and turn back to the room with its clutter and stink.

Recidivism. Fancy word for girls with a compulsion. Like a nithead or a coke freak, but weirder, more self-destructive. At least being a junkie is fun. Who the hell chooses to live in dark apartments with shitty diapers, instant food, and no sleep for years on end? The whole breeding thing is an anachronism — twenty-first century ritual torture we don't need anymore. But these girls keep trying to turn back the clock and pop out the pups, little lizard brains compelled to pass on some DNA. And there's a new batch every year, little burps of offspring cropping up here and there,

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the convulsions of a species trying to restart itself and get evolution rolling again, like we can't tell that we've already won.

I'm keying through the directory listings in my cruiser, fiddling through ads and keywords and search preferences, trying to zero in on something that doesn't come up no matter how I go after it.

Dinosaur.

Toys.

Stuffed animals.

Nothing. Nobody sells stuff like that dinosaur. But I've run into two of them now.

Monkeys scamper over the roof of my car. One of them lands on my forward impact rails and looks at me, yellow eyes wide, before another jumps it and they fall off the carbon petal pullout where I'm parked. Somewhere down below, suburban crumble keeps small herds of them. I remember when this area was tundra. It was a long time ago. I've talked to techs in the carbon sink business who talk about flipping the climate and building an icecap, but it's a slow process, an accretion of centuries most likely. Assuming I don't get shot by a crazy mom or a nithead, I'll see it happen. But for now, it's monkeys and jungle.

Forty-eight hours on call and two more cleanups and Alice wants me to take the weekend off and play, but I can't. I'm living on perkies, now. She feels good about her work, and wants me all day. We've done it before. Lying together, enjoying the silence and our own company, the pleasure of just being together with nothing needing to be done. There's something wonderful about peace and silence and sea breezes twisting the curtains on the balcony.

I should go home. In a week, maybe, she'll be back at worrying, doubting herself, thrashing herself to work harder, to practice longer, to listen and feel and move inside of music that's so complex it might as well be the mathematics of chaos for anyone but her. But in reality, she has time. All the time in the world, and it makes me happy that she has it, that fifteen years isn't too long to prepare for something as heartstoppingly beautiful as what she did with Telogo.

I want to spend this time with her, to enjoy her bliss. But I don't want to go back and sleep with that dinosaur. I can't.

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I call her from the cruiser.

"Alice?"

She looks out at me from the dash. "Are you coming home? I could meet you for lunch."

"Do you know where Maria got that dinosaur toy?"

She shrugs. "Maybe one of the shops on the Span? Why?"

"Just wondering." I pause. "Could you go get it for me?"

"Why? Why can't we do something fun? I'm on vacation. I just had my rejoo. I feel great. If you want to see my dinosaur, why don't you come home and get it?"

"Alice, please."

Scowling, she disappears from the screen. In a few minutes she's back, holding it up to the screen, shoving it in my face. I can feel my heart beating faster. It's cool in the cruiser, but I break into a sweat when I see the dinosaur on the screen. I clear my throat. "What's it say on the tag?"

Frowning, she turns the thing over, runs her fingers through its fur. She holds up the tag to the camera. It comes in blurry as the camera focuses, then it's there, clear and sharp. "*Ipswitch Collectibles.*"

Of course. Not a toy at all.

THE WOMAN who runs Ipswitch is old, as old a rejoo as I've ever met. The wrinkles on her face look so much like plastic that it's hard to tell what's real and what may be a mask. Her eyes are sunken little blue coals and her hair is so white I think of weddings and silk. She must have been ninety when rejoo hit.

Whatever the name of it, Ipswitch Collectibles is full of toys: dolls staring down from their racks, different faces and shapes and colors of hair, some of them soft, some of them made of hard bright plastics; tiny trains that run around miniature tracks and spout steam from their pinky-sized smokestacks; figurines from old-time movies and comics in action poses: Superman, Dolphina, Rex Mutinous. And, under a shelf of hand-carved wooden cars, a bin full of stuffed dinosaurs in green and blue and red. A tyrannosaurus rex. A pterodactyl. The brontosaurus.

"I've got a few stegosauruses in the back."

I look up, startled. The old woman watches me from behind the

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counter, a strange wrinkly buzzard, studying me with those sharp blue eyes, examining me like I'm carrion.

I pick out the brontosaurus and hold it up by the neck. "No. These're fine."

A bell rings. The shop's main doors to the concourse slide open. A woman steps through, hesitant. Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail and she hasn't applied any makeup, and I can tell, even before she's all the way through the door, that she's one of them: a mom.

She hasn't been off rejoo long; she still looks fresh and young, despite the plumpness that comes with kids. She still looks good. But even without rejoo collapse tell-tales, I know what she's done to herself. She's got the tired look of a person at war with the world. None of us look like that. No one has to look like that. Nitheads look less beseiged. She's trying to act like the person she was before, like the actress or the financial advisor or the code engineer or the biologist or the waitress or whatever, putting on clothes from her life before, that used to fit perfectly and don't now, making herself look like a person who walks without fear in the open air, and who doesn't now.

As she wanders the aisles, I spy a stain on her shoulder. It's small but obvious if you know what to look for, a light streak of green on a creamy blouse. The kind of thing that never happens to anyone except women with children. No matter how hard she tries, she doesn't fit anymore. Not with us.

Ipswitch Collectibles, like others of its ilk, is a trap door of sorts — a rabbit hole down into the land of illicit motherhood: the place of mashed pea stains, sound-proofed walls, and furtive forays into daylight for resupply and survival. If I stand here long enough, holding my magic brontosaurus by the neck, I'll slip through entirely and see their world as it overlaps with my own, see it with the queer double vision of these women who have learned to turn a drawer into a crib, and know how to fold and pin an old shirt into a diaper, and know that "*collectibles*" really means "*toys.*"

The woman slips in the direction of the train sets. She chooses one and places it on the counter. It's a bright wooden thing, each car a different color, each connected by a magnet.

The old woman takes the train and says, "Oh yes, this is a fine piece.

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I had grandchildren who played with trains like this when they were just a little more than one."

The mother doesn't say anything, just holds out her wrist for the charge, her eyes down on the train. She fingers the blue and yellow engine nervously.

I come up to the counter. "I'll bet you sell a lot of them."

The mother jerks. For a second she looks like she'll run, but she steadies. The old woman's eyes turn on me. Dark sunken blue cores, infinitely knowledgeable. "Not many. Not now. Not many collectors around for this sort of thing. Not now."

The transaction clears. The woman hustles out of the store, not looking back. I watch her go.

The old woman says, "That dinosaur is forty-seven, if you want it." Her tone says that she already knows I won't be buying.

I'm not a collector.

Night time. More dark-of-night encounters with illicit motherhood. The babies are everywhere, popping up like toadstools after rain. I can't keep up with them. I had to leave my last call before the cleanup crew came. Broke the chain of evidence, but what can you do? Everywhere I go, the baby world is ripping open around me, melons and seedpods and fertile wombs splitting open and vomiting babies onto the ground. We're drowning in babies. The jungle seems to seethe with them, the hidden women down in the suburb swelter, and as I shoot along the maglines on my way to bloody errands, the jungle's tendril vines curl up from below, reaching out to me.

I've got the mom's address in my cruiser. She's hidden now. Back down the rabbit hole. Pulled the lid down tight over her head. Lying low with her brood, reconnected with the underground of women who have all decided to kill themselves for the sake of squeezing out pups. Back in the swelter of locked doors and poopy diapers amongst the sorority who give train sets to little creatures who actually play with them instead of putting them on an end table and making you look at them every damn day....

The woman. The *collector*. I've been holding off on hitting her. It doesn't seem fair. It seems like I should wait for her to make her mistake before I pop her kids. But knowing that she's out there tickles my mind.

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I catch myself again and again, reaching to key in the homing on her address.

But then another call comes, another cleanup, and I let myself pretend I don't know about her, that I haven't perforated her hidey-hole and can now peer in on her whenever I like. The woman we don't know about — yet. Who hasn't made a mistake — yet. Instead I barrel down the rails to another call, slicing through jungle overstory where it impinges around the tracks, blasting toward another woman's destiny who was less lucky and less clever than the one who likes to collect. And these other women hold me for a little while. But in the end, parked on the edge of the sea, with monkeys screeching from the jungle and rain spackling my windshield, I punch in the collector's address.

I'll just drive by.

It could have been a rich house, before carbon sequestration. Before we all climbed into the bright air of the spires and superclusters. But now it exists at the very edge of what is left of suburbs. I'm surprised it even has electric or any services running to it at all. The jungle surrounds it, envelopes it. The road to it, off the maglines and off the maintenance routes, is heaved and split and perforated with encroaching trees. She's smart. She's as close to wilderness as it is possible to live. Beyond is only shadow tangle and green darkness. Monkeys scamper away from the spray of my headlights. The houses around her have already been abandoned. Any day now, they'll stop serving this area entirely. In another couple years, this portion will be completely overgrown. We'll cut off services and the last of the spires will go online and the jungle will swallow this place completely.

I sit outside the house for a while, looking at it. She's a smart one. To live this far out. No neighbors to hear the screaming. But if I think about it, she would have been smarter to move into the jungle entirely, and live with all the other monkeys that just can't keep themselves from breeding. I guess at the end of the day, even these crazy ladies are still human. They can't leave civilization totally behind. Or don't know how, anyway.

I get out of my car, pull my Grange, and hit the door.

As I slam through, she looks up from where she sits at her kitchen table. She isn't even surprised. A little bit of her seems to deflate, and

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that's all. Like she knew it was going to happen all along. Like I said: a smart one.

A kid runs in from the other room, attracted by the noise of me coming through the door. Maybe one and a half or two years old. It stops and stares, little tow-headed thing, its hair already getting long like hers. We stare at each other. Then it turns and scrambles into its mother's lap.

The woman closes her eyes. "Go on, then. Do it."

I point my Grange, my 12mm hand cannon. Zero in on the kid. The lady wraps her arms around it. It's not a clear shot. It'll rip right through and take out the mom. I angle differently, looking for the shot. Nothing.

She opens her eyes. "What are you waiting for?"

We stare at each other. "I saw you in the toy store. A couple days ago."

She closes her eyes again, regretful, understanding her mistake. She doesn't let go of the kid. I could just take it out of her arms, throw it on the floor and shoot it. But I don't. Her eyes are still closed.

"Why do you do it?" I ask.

Her eyes open again. She's confused. I'm breaking the script. She's mapped this out in her own mind. Probably a thousand times. Had to. Had to know this day would be coming. But here I am, all alone, and her kid's not dead yet. And I keep asking her questions.

"Why do you keep having these kids?"

She just stares at me. The kid squirms around on her and tries to start nursing. She lifts her blouse a little and the kid dives under. I can see the hanging bulges of the lady's breasts, these heavy swinging mammaries, so much larger than I remember them from the store when they were hidden under bra and blouse. They sag while the kid sucks. The woman just stares at me. She's on some kind of autopilot, feeding the kid. Last meal.

I take my hat off and put it on the table and sit. I put my Grange down, too. It just doesn't seem right to blow the sucker away while it's nursing. I take out a cigarette and light it. Take a drag. The woman watches me the way anyone watches a predator. I take another drag on my cigarette and offer it to her.

"Smoke?"

"I don't." She jerks her head toward her kid.

I nod. "Ah. Right. Bad for the new lungs. I heard that, once. Can't remember where." I grin. "Can't remember when."

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She stares at me. "What are you waiting for?"

I look down at my pistol, lying on the table. The heavy machine weight of slugs and steel, a monster weapon. Grange 12mm Recoilless Hand Cannon. Standard issue. Stop a nitfitter in his tracks. Take out the whole damn heart if you hit them right. Pulverize a baby. "You had to stop taking rejoo to have the kid, right?"

She shrugs. "It's just an additive. They don't have to make rejoo that way."

"But otherwise we'd have a big damn population problem, wouldn't we?"

She shrugs again.

The gun sits on the table between us. Her eyes flick toward the gun, then to me, then back to the gun. I take a drag on the cigarette. I can tell what she's thinking, looking at that big old steel hand cannon on her table. It's way out of her reach, but she's desperate, so it looks a lot closer to her, almost close enough. Almost.

Her eyes go back up to me. "Why don't you just do it? Get it over with?"

It's my turn to shrug. I don't really have an answer. I should be taking pictures and securing her in the car, and popping the kid, and calling in the cleanup squad, but here we sit. She's got tears in her eyes. I watch her cry. Mammaries and fatty limbs and a frightening sort of wisdom, maybe coming from knowing that she won't last forever. A contrast to Alice with her smooth smooth skin and high bright breasts. This woman is fecund. Hips and breasts and belly fertile, surrounded by her messy kitchen, the jungle outside. The soil of life. She seems settled in all of this, a damp Gaia creature.

A dinosaur.

I should be cuffing her. I've got her and her kid. I should be shooting the kid. But I don't. Instead, I've got a hard-on. She's not beautiful exactly, but I've got a hard-on. She sags, she's round, she's breasty and hippy and sloppy; I can barely sit because my pants are so tight. I try not to stare at the kid nursing. At her exposed breasts. I take another drag on my cigarette. "You know, I've been doing this job for a long time."

She stares at me dully, doesn't say anything.

"I've always wanted to know why you women do this." I nod at the

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kid. It's come off her breast, and now the whole thing is exposed, this huge sagging thing with its heavy nipple. She doesn't cover up. When I look up, she's studying me, seeing me looking at her breast. The kid scrambles down and watches me, too, solemn-eyed. I wonder if it can feel the tension in the room. If it knows what's coming. "Why the kid? Really. Why?"

She purses her lips. I think I can see anger in the tightening of her teary eyes, anger that I'm playing with her. That I'm sitting here, talking to her with my Grange on her grimy table, but then her eyes go down to that gun and I can almost see the gears clicking. The calculations. The she-wolf gathering herself.

She sighs and scoots her chair forward. "I just wanted one. Ever since I was a little girl."

"Play with dolls, all that? *Collectibles*?"

She shrugs. "I guess." She pauses. Eyes back to the gun. "Yeah. I guess I did. I had a little plastic doll, and I used to dress it up. And I'd play tea with it. You know, we'd make tea, and then I'd pour some on her face, to make her drink. It wasn't a great doll: Voice input, but not much repertoire. My parents weren't rich. 'Let's go shopping.' '*Okay, for what*?' 'For watches.' '*I love watches*.' Simple. Like that. But I liked it. And then one day I called her my baby. I don't know why. I did, though, and the doll said, '*I love you mommy*.'"

Her eyes turn wet as she speaks. "And I just knew I wanted to have a baby. I played with her all the time, and she'd pretend she was my baby, and then my mother caught us doing it and said I was a stupid girl, and I shouldn't talk that way, girls didn't have babies anymore, and she took the doll away."

The kid is down on the floor, shoving blocks under the table. Stacking and unstacking. It catches sight of me. It's got blue eyes and a shy smile. I get a twitch of it, again, and then it scrambles up off the floor, and buries its face in its mother's breasts, hiding. It peeks out at me, and giggles and hides again.

I nod at the kid. "Who's the dad?"

Stone cold face. "I don't know. I got a sample shipped from a guy I found online. We didn't want to meet. I erased everything about him as soon as I got the sample."

"Too bad. Things would have been better if you'd kept in touch."

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"Better for you."

"That's what I said." I notice that the ash on my cigarette has gotten long, a thin gray penis hanging limp off the end of my smoke. I give it a twitch and it falls. "I still can't get over the rejoo part."

Inexplicably, she laughs. Brightens even. "Why? Because I'm not so in love with myself that I just want to live forever and ever?"

"What were you going to do? Keep it in the house until — "

"Her," She interrupts suddenly. "Keep *her* in the house. *She* is a *girl* and her name is Melanie."

At her name, the kid looks over at me. She sees my hat on the table and grabs it. Then climbs down off her mother's lap and carries it over to me. She holds it out to me, arms fully extended, an offering. I try to take it but she pulls the hat away.

"She wants to put it on your head."

I look at the lady, confused. She's smiling slightly, sadly. "It's a game she plays. She likes to put hats on my head."

I look at the girl again. She's getting antsy, holding the hat. She makes little grunts of meaning at me and waves the hat invitingly. I lean down. The girl puts the hat on my head, and beams. I sit up and set it more firmly.

"You're smiling," she says.

I look up at her. "She's cute."

"You like her, don't you?"

I look at the girl again, thinking. "Can't say. I've never really looked at them before."

"Liar."

My cigarette is dead. I stub it out on the kitchen table. She watches me do it, frowning, pissed off that I'm messing up her messy table, maybe, but then she seems to remember the gun. And I do, too. A chill runs up my spine. For a moment, when I leaned down to the girl, I'd forgotten about it. I could be dead, right now. Funny how we forget and remember and forget these things. Both of us. Me and the lady. One minute we're having a conversation, the next we're waiting for the killing to start.

This lady seems like she would have been a nice date. She's got spunk. You can tell that. It almost comes out before she remembers the gun. You can watch it flicker back and forth. She's one person, then another person: alive, thinking, remembering, then bang, she's sitting in a kitchen full of

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crusty dishes, coffee rings on her countertop and a cop with a hand cannon sitting at the kitchen table.

I spark up another cigarette. "Don't you miss the rejoo?"

She looks down at her daughter, holds out her arms. "No. Not a bit." The girl climbs back onto her mother's lap.

I let the smoke curl out of my mouth. "But there's no way you were going to get away with this. It's insane. You have to drop off of rejoo; you have to find a sperm donor who's willing to drop off, too, so two people kill themselves for a kid; you've got to birth the kid alone, and then you've got to keep it hidden, and then you'd eventually need an ID card so you could get it started on rejoo, because nobody's going to dose an undocumented patient, and you've got to know that none of this would ever work. But here you are."

She scowls at me. "I could have done it."

"You didn't."

Bang. She's back in the kitchen again. She slumps in her chair, holding the kid. "So why don't you just hurry up and do it?"

I shrug. "I was just curious about what you breeders are thinking."

She looks at me, hard. Angry. "You know what I'm thinking? I'm thinking we need something new. I've been alive for one hundred and eighteen years and I'm thinking that it's not just about me. I'm thinking I want a baby and I want to see what she sees today when she wakes up and what she'll find and see that I've never seen before because that's new. Finally, something new. I love seeing things through her little eyes and not through dead eyes like yours."

"I don't have dead eyes."

"Look in the mirror. You've all got dead eyes."

"I'm a hundred and fifty and I feel just as good as I did the day I went on."

"I'll bet you can't even remember. No one remembers." Her eyes are on the gun again, but they come up off it to look at me. "But I do. Now. And it's better this way. A thousand times better than living forever."

I make a face. "Live through your kid and all that?"

"You wouldn't understand. None of you would."

I look away. I don't know why. I'm the one with the gun. I'm running everything, but she's looking at me, and something gets tight inside me

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when she says that. If I was imaginative, I'd say it was some little bit of old primal monkey trying to drag itself out of the muck and make itself heard. Some bit of the critter we were before. I look at the kid — the girl — and she's looking back at me. I wonder if they all do the trick with the hat, or if this one's special somehow. If they all like to put hats on their killers' heads. She smiles at me and ducks her head back under her mother's arm. The woman's got her eyes on my gun.

"You want to shoot me?" I ask.

Her eyes come up. "No."

I smile slightly. "Come on. Be honest."

Her eyes narrow. "I'd blow your head off if I could."

Suddenly I'm tired. I don't care anymore. I'm sick of the dirty kitchen and the dark rooms and the smell of dirty makeshift diapers. I give the Grange a push, shove it closer to her. "Go ahead. You going to kill an old life so you can save one that isn't even going to last? I'm going to live forever, and that little girl won't last longer than seventy years even if she's lucky — which she won't be — and you're practically already dead. But you want to waste my life?" I feel like I'm standing on the edge of a cliff. Possibility seethes around me. "Give it a shot."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm giving you your shot. You want to try for it? This is your chance." I shove the Grange a little closer, baiting her. I'm tingling all over. My head feels light, almost dizzy. Adrenaline rushes through me. I push the Grange even closer to her, suddenly not even sure if I'll fight her for the gun, or if I'll just let her have it. "This is your chance."

She doesn't give a warning.

She flings herself across the table. Her kid flies out of her arms. Her fingers touch the gun at the same time as I yank it out of reach. She lunges again, clawing across the table. I jump back, knocking over my chair. I step out of range. She stretches toward the gun, fingers wide and grasping, desperate still, even though she knows she's already lost. I point the gun at her.

She stares at me, then puts her head down on the table and sobs.

The girl is crying too. She sits bawling on the floor, her little face screwed up and red, crying along with her mother who's given everything in that one run at my gun: all her hopes and years of hidden dedication, all

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her need to protect her progeny, everything. And now she lies sprawled on a dirty table and cries while her daughter howls from the floor. The girl keeps screaming and screaming.

I sight the Grange on the girl. She's exposed, now. She's squalling and holding her hands out to her mother, but she doesn't get up. She just holds out her hands, waiting to be picked up and held by a lady who doesn't have anything left to give. She doesn't notice me or the gun.

One quick shot and she's gone, paint hole in the forehead and brains on the wall just like spaghetti and the crying's over and all that's left is gunpowder burn and cleanup calls.

But I don't fire.

Instead, I holster my Grange and walk out the door, leaving them to their crying and their grime and their lives.

It's raining again, outside. Thick ropes of water spout off the eaves and spatter the ground. All around me the jungle seethes with the chatter of monkeys. I pull up my collar and resettle my hat. Behind me, I can barely hear the crying anymore.

Maybe they'll make it. Anything is possible. Maybe the kid will make it to eighteen, get some black market rejoo and live to be a hundred and fifty. More likely, in six months, or a year, or two years, or ten, a cop will bust down the door and pop the kid. But it won't be me.

I run for my cruiser, splashing through mud and vines and wet. And for the first time in a long time, the rain feels new.

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SCIENCE

PAUL DOHERTY & PAT MURPHY

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, BEN FRANKLIN

JANUARY 17, 2006, was the three hundredth anniversary of Benjamin Franklin's birth. As you no doubt know, Benjamin Franklin was one of our country's Founding Fathers, which means he was a troublemaker. (If you don't believe us, ask King George.) Franklin was also a writer, a philosopher, a statesman, a printer, a scientist, and an inventor. As you might guess, we're most interested in these last two occupations.

Franklin made scientific discoveries in a wide range of fields. While he was postmaster general, he invented an odometer and used it to measure the length of postal routes. He invented the Franklin stove, a urinary catheter, bifocals, and the lightning rod.

Though we respect Franklin's industry and inventiveness, Pat has a bone to pick with him. Her complaint relates to the area in which Franklin made some of his greatest discoveries: electricity.

But before we get to Pat's complaints, we'll tell you a little about electricity. Usually, at this point in our column, we connect our topic to science fiction, citing this story or that novel. But when it comes to electricity, Pat maintains that the connection is actually to fantasy. Understanding electricity requires accepting the existence of worlds that you can't see or experience directly. When you start poking around, trying to figure out what's going on, you find out things are much weirder than you ever figured. You don't exactly open a door in the back of a wardrobe and walk through into another world, but close enough.

Just as so many fantasy novels begin in our familiar world, we will begin with something familiar: the spark of static electricity that jumps from your finger to a doorknob after you walk across a wool carpet.

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That's static electricity or electrostatics.

Suspended Children and Spinning Sulfur Balls

In Franklin's time, scientists in Europe had been studying electrostatics for hundreds of years. They knew that if you rubbed wool on the fossilized tree sap known as amber, then the amber would attract little pieces of paper. In 1600, William Gilbert coined the name for the science of electricity from the Greek name for amber: *elektron*.

In 1660, Otto Von Guericke experimented with a spinning sulfur ball about the size of a child's head. Rubbed with his hand, the ball made sparks and attracted bits of leaves, gold dust, and snips of paper. A woodcut of the period depicts a more elaborate experiment in which a child suspended on silk ropes rubbed a spinning ball of sulfur with one hand while attracting bits of paper with the other.

In 1746, Pieter van Musschenbroek experimented with collecting the electric charge produced by an electrostatic machine in a device later called the Leyden jar. (He got a nasty shock in the process.)

The Leyden jar not only revolutionized the study of electrostatics, it also became a popular sensation. In the 1750s, experimenters all over Europe demonstrated electricity with Leyden jars, often sending the charge through chains of people holding hands. In a demonstration for King Louis XV, French clergyman and physicist Jean-Antoine Nollet sent a current through a chain of 180 Royal Guards, making all the soldiers jump simultaneously.

Through experimenting, people made discoveries about how electricity behaved. But they had had no simple theory to explain the results of their experiments. What was it about rubbed amber that made it exert an invisible attractive force on the distant pieces of paper? What exactly was stored in the Leyden jar? No one knew. Based on their experiments, European experimenters surmised that there were two kinds of electricity: vitreous, which you got by rubbing glass with silk, and resinous, which you got by rubbing amber or resin with wool.

That's where Ben Franklin came into the picture.

Ben Franklin read about the European experiments and repeated them. He explained the results with

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a single form of electricity, hypothesizing that there was an "electric fluid." There could be too much of this fluid (a condition he called plus) or too little (a condition he called minus). This fluid could move from regions of excess to regions that were depleted.

Of course an object could also have neither excess nor deficiency and be neutral or have zero electric charge. Franklin also noted that an object in the plus condition attracted an object in the minus condition. Plusses repelled each other and minuses repelled each other. (From this we get the saying that "Like charges repel and opposite charges attract.")

Franklin designated vitreous electricity (which you got by rubbing glass with cloth) as "plus." It was an arbitrary choice. He could equally well have called resinous electricity "plus." We'll get back to that (and explain why Pat regards Franklin's choice as troublesome), in a bit. But before we do, we want you to do a little experimenting.

The most amazing electrostatic diagnostic tool ever

Not long after the invention of the Leyden jar, Jean Nollet (yes, the same one who made those soldiers jump) invented the electroscope, a device for detecting electric charge. Today you can build your own electroscope with a roll of Scotch® brand Magic tape. (Yes, it has to be Scotch® brand. Don't substitute any other kind!)

Here's what you do: Take two pieces of tape, each one about as long as your hand is wide. Stick the sticky side of one tape onto the non-sticky side of the other. Now pull the two tapes apart quickly.

As the tapes separate, they will grab your hand. When you free them from your hand, they will attract and stick to each other. If you and a friend do this at the same time, one of your tapes will attract one of your friend's tapes and repel the other.

Pulling apart two pieces of tape causes one to become positively charged and the other to be negatively charged. To find which is which we can return to Ben Franklin (who didn't have any Scotch® brand tape, but did have something to say about charge). Franklin defined negative charge as the charge on the amber when it was rubbed with wool. If you don't have a large lump of amber around the house, you can substitute your hair for the wool and a rubber or plastic comb for the amber. Run the comb through your

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hair and it will pick up a charge that Ben Franklin would define as negative, the same as amber rubbed with wool.

Bring the negatively charged comb near one of the tapes, and then the other. The tape that the comb repels is negatively charged. The tape that the comb attracts is positively charged. Now you can bring your tapes near objects with unknown charges and determine whether those objects are positively charged, negatively charged, or neutral. (An object that is uncharged or neutral will attract both tapes.)

While you're experimenting, bring your tapes near the front of an operating television — an old television with a picture tube, that is, not a plasma screen or LCD display. Notice that the screen is positively charged. That's why TV screens get covered with dust. The positively charged screen attracts the neutral dust particles.

Fantasy? Or Science Fiction?

Let's take a minute and talk about what is going on when you tear those pieces of tape apart.

When you pulled your tape sandwich apart, you also ripped apart some atoms!

Here's where Pat says we get into the realm of the fantastic. Like everything else in your house, the tape is made of particles too tiny for you to see. These particles are called atoms. Atoms are made of even tinier particles called *electrons*, *protons*, and *neutrons*. Both electrons and protons are electrically charged particles. Electrons are negatively charged and protons are positively charged.

When you pull the tape apart, you are pulling some electrons away from their protons. One piece of tape ends up with more electrons — it's negatively charged. The other one ends up with more protons and it's positively charged.

That's the story that the physicists tell — and it's a pretty good story. It explains a lot of things.

Positive charges and negative charges like to stick together. (Paul says physicists don't know yet why they attract each other. They just do.) The two pieces of tape are attracted to each other because one is positively charged and the other is negatively charged.

When you run a comb through your hair, the comb ends up with excess electrons and becomes negatively charged. Since negative charges push away other negative charges, the comb pushes the negatively

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charged tape away and attracts the positively charged one.

The Mythical Current

That's all well and good. Pat would have no complaints with Benjamin Franklin if electrical experimentation had stopped with electrostatics. But it didn't. In 1799, Alessandro Volta created the first electrical battery, known as the Voltaic cell. In 1821, Michael Faraday began experimenting with devices that led to the development of the electric motor and the electric generator. One thing led to another, and we ended up where we are today — in a world largely powered by electricity.

Consider, if you will, one situation in which electricity is used. Suppose you turn on the headlights in your car. Your car's battery has a positive terminal and a negative terminal. A wire runs from the positive terminal, through the headlights, through a switch, to the negative terminal. When you turn on the headlights, the switch closes, letting an electric current flow through the wire and through the headlights, causing the filament in the headlights to glow.

So far, that description matches Franklin's way of talking about electricity. He said that the electrical fluid moved from one place to another. He would say that the current flows from the positive terminal (the place of excess electric fluid, to his way of thinking) to the negative terminal (the place deficient in electric fluid).

According to the physicists, that's not what's going on at all. They say that the electrons are moving. When you turn on the headlights, you throw a switch and complete an electric circuit. That circuit is a path along which negatively charged electrons can move.

Electrons move from the negative terminal through the headlights to the positive terminal. Though the lights come on as soon as you throw the switch, an electron will take several hours to make the journey from the negative terminal to the positive terminal. (But that's a story, which we'll save for another day.)

So here's the problem. Electricians talk about electricity as Franklin did. They treat electric current as if it goes from the positive terminal of the battery, through the circuit, to the negative terminal. That's how they talk about it. They give this mythical flow of positive charges a name: the conventional current.

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Even after all these years at the Exploratorium, there are days when Pat is not so sure she believes in atoms, electrons, protons, and other particles too small to see. (This is a situation that will be corrected or exacerbated over the next year. Pat is currently working on a project dealing with nanotechnology, which is all too small to see. More on that next column.) But even on days when Pat accepts atoms without blinking, even on days when she can accept the flow of electrons through the wire, she has a problem with the flow of positives that engineers talk about.

There is no flow of positives. That positive flow is the legacy of Ben Franklin and his electric fluid. The original model for understanding electricity — which was very useful when Franklin came up with it — lives on to make trouble.

Of course, that's the way science works. Any model we have for the universe — whether it's a model for light or a model for electricity or whatever — breaks down at some point. The model is not the thing. The model is a human invention — a fantasy — intended to explain the thing. It's a way of understanding the invisible, the intangible.

The trick in science is picking the simplest model that gives the right answer. And Franklin did that as well as he could at the time. He realized that the model involving the two kinds of electricity postulated by others could be simplified, and he did so. And in doing so, he left us with a mythical current that flows in the direction that electrons do not.

About Those Lightning Rods

We can't leave a discussion of Ben Franklin and electricity without mentioning the story that every schoolchild knows: Ben Franklin flew a kite in a thunderstorm. Why? To generate sparks so that he could compare the behavior of those sparks to the charges generated in his down-to-earth experiments. As a result of this experimentation, he proposed that lightning was nature's own electrostatics experiment.[1]

Having made the connection between electrostatics experiments in the laboratory and those in nature, Franklin found a practical

[1]Franklin was lucky. When Georg Richmann repeated this experiment in St. Petersburg lightning struck the kite, came down the string and killed the experimenter. If you learn one thing from this story it is this: don't fly a kite in a thunderstorm!

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application for his new ideas and invented the lightning rod. A lightning rod is a metal rod sticking up from the rooftop of a building and connected by a good conductor (a heavy copper wire) into the earth.

A full explanation of how a lightning rod works is a little tricky. Paul can demonstrate how it works with a Van de Graaff generator, the static electricity device near to the hearts of science demonstrators everywhere. Suppose you had set up a metal object near a Van de Graaff generator and had sparks jumping happily from the generator to the metal object. Suppose you used an insulated handle to hold a pointed metal rod connected to the earth (referred to by electricians as the "ground") and bring the point near the Van De Graaff generator. The sparks would stop.

Why? Because when a pointed object is electrically charged, electric forces are concentrated near the point. These forces rip apart air molecules, ionizing them. The space around the point is filled with charged particles, which discharge the generator faster than charge can build up.

The same thing happens with a lightning rod. The pointed rod discharges the local electrostatic charges and helps prevent a lightning strike.

Franklin's discovery that lightning is an electrical discharge had an enormous social impact. With Franklin's invention, people could protect themselves from lightning, a wild force of nature. At the time, this accomplishment was regarded by many as being just as important as his role in the American Revolution. As Anne-Robert Jacques Turgot wrote of him in 1776: "Eripuit caelo fulmen, sceptrumque tyrannis" ("He snatched lightning from the sky and the scepter from tyrants").

Since Franklin's time, scientists have continued studying lightning. Yet they still do not have a model that explains it fully. They know that in most cumulonimbus clouds a region of negative charge forms near the bottom of the cloud while a region of positive charge forms near the top. But they don't know the mechanism by which the charge is separated inside the cloud, or why falling raindrops leave some of their charge at the bottom of the cloud as they continue to fall to the ground.

To measure the charge distribution in the clouds, adventurous scientists fly gliders into these thunderstorms with an electronic version of your tape electroscope. Did you ever wonder what you can do with a bachelor's degree in physics? At the National Center for Atmo-

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spheric Research, Paul once saw a job listing looking for someone with a bachelor's degree in physics, a glider pilot's license, and parachuting experience. The job was flying gliders into thunderstorms. Why did the applicant need parachute experience? Because the thunderstorms sometimes ripped the wings off the gliders!

You now know better than to fly a kite in a thunderstorm, but there are plenty of dangerously intriguing scientific puzzles yet to be solved for those who would like to follow in Ben Franklin's footsteps.

The Exploratorium is San Francisco's museum of science, art, and human perception — where science and science fiction meet. Pat Murphy and Paul Doherty both work there. To learn more about Pat Murphy's science fiction writing, visit her web site at *www.brazenhussies.net/murphy*. For more on Paul Doherty's work and his latest adventures, visit *www.exo.net/~pauld*.

Coming Attractions

For the December issue, our cover story is a new one by M. Rickert, whose "Journey into the Kingdom" was considered breathtaking by a good portion of our readership. In "The Christmas Witch," she takes us to New England, where a long local tradition of witchcraft has some very modern—and very horrific—results.

Fans of *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* will be glad to hear that we have a story by Susanna Clarke scheduled to run next month. In fact, it's a tale of the Raven King, but even if you haven't read Ms. Clarke's novel, you're apt to find "John Uskglass and the Cumbrian Charcoal Burner" a delightful read.

We also expect to see that intrepid explorer of the noösphere, Guth Bandar, return next month in a new adventure from the mind of Matthew Hughes. In "Bye the Rules," Bandar's rivalry with Didrick Gabbris attains new heights (or lows, depending on one's perspective).

Looking ahead, we've got lots of great stories in the works, including new ones by A. A. Attanasio, Fred Chappell, Ron Goulart, Marta Randall, and Bruce Sterling. Subscribe now and you'll reap the rewards throughout the year.

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Much of Geoff Ryman's work has shown a strong interest in Asia, including The Unconquered Country *and more recent stories such as "The Last Ten Years in the Life of Hero Kai" (from our Dec. 2005 issue), the award-winning novel* Air, *and his most recent book,* The King's Last Song. *In case you can't guess from the title, his new story is about Cambodia. It's completely untrue and highly compelling.*

Pol Pot's Beautiful Daughter (Fantasy)

By Geoff Ryman

IN CAMBODIA PEOPLE ARE used to ghosts. Ghosts buy newspapers. They own property.

A few years ago, spirits owned a house in Phnom Penh, at the Tra Bek end of Monivong Boulevard. Khmer Rouge had murdered the whole family and there was no one left alive to inherit it. People cycled past the building, leaving it boarded up. Sounds of weeping came from inside.

Then a professional inheritor arrived from America. She'd done her research and could claim to be the last surviving relative of no fewer than three families. She immediately sold the house to a Chinese businessman, who turned the ground floor into a photocopying shop.

The copiers began to print pictures of the original owners.

At first, single black and white photos turned up in the copied dossiers of aid workers or government officials. The father of the murdered family had been a lawyer. He stared fiercely out of the photos as if demanding something. In other photocopies, his beautiful daughters forlornly hugged each other. The background was hazy like fog.

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One night the owner heard a noise and trundled downstairs to find all five photocopiers printing one picture after another of faces: young college men, old women, parents with a string of babies, or government soldiers in uniform. He pushed the big green off-buttons. Nothing happened.

He pulled out all the plugs, but the machines kept grinding out face after face. Women in beehive hairdos or clever children with glasses looked wistfully out of the photocopies. They seemed to be dreaming of home in the 1960s, when Phnom Penh was the most beautiful city in Southeast Asia.

News spread. People began to visit the shop to identify lost relatives. Women would cry, "That's my mother! I didn't have a photograph!" They would weep and press the flimsy A4 sheets to their breasts. The paper went limp from tears and humidity as if it too were crying.

Soon, a throng began to gather outside the shop every morning to view the latest batch of faces. In desperation, the owner announced that each morning's harvest would be delivered direct to *The Truth*, a magazine of remembrance.

Then one morning he tried to open the house-door to the shop and found it blocked. He went 'round to the front of the building and rolled open the metal shutters.

The shop was packed from floor to ceiling with photocopies. The ground floor had no windows — the room had been filled from the inside. The owner pulled out a sheet of paper and saw himself on the ground, his head beaten in by a hoe. The same image was on every single page.

He buried the photocopiers and sold the house at once. The new owner liked its haunted reputation; it kept people away. The FOR SALE sign was left hanging from the second floor.

In a sense, the house had been bought by another ghost.

This is a completely untrue story about someone who must exist.

POL POT'S ONLY CHILD, a daughter, was born in 1986. Her name was Sith, and in 2004, she was eighteen years old.

Sith liked air conditioning and luxury automobiles. Her hair was dressed in cornrows and she had a spiky piercing above one

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eye. Her jeans were elaborately slashed and embroidered. Her pink T-shirts bore slogans in English: CARE KOOKY. PINK MOLL.

Sith lived like a woman on Thai television, doing as she pleased in lip-gloss and Sunsilked hair. Nine simple rules helped her avoid all unpleasantness.

1. Never think about the past or politics.
2. Ignore ghosts. They cannot hurt you.
3. Do not go to school. Hire tutors. Don't do homework. It is disturbing.
4. Always be driven everywhere in either the Mercedes or the BMW.
5. Avoid all well-dressed Cambodian boys. They are the sons of the estimated 250,000 new generals created by the regime. Their sons can behave with impunity.
6. Avoid all men with potbellies. They eat too well and therefore must be corrupt.
7. Avoid anyone who drives a Toyota Viva or Honda Dream motorcycle.
8. Don't answer letters or phone calls.
9. Never make any friends.

There was also a tenth rule, but that went without saying.

Rotten fruit rinds and black mud never stained Sith's designer sports shoes. Disabled beggars never asked her for alms. Her life began yesterday, which was effectively the same as today.

Every day, her driver took her to the new Soriya Market. It was almost the only place that Sith went. The color of silver, Soriya rose up in many floors to a round glass dome.

Sith preferred the 142nd Street entrance. Its green awning made everyone look as if they were made of jade. The doorway went directly into the ice-cold jewelry rotunda with its floor of polished black and white stone. The individual stalls were hung with glittering necklaces and earrings.

Sith liked tiny shiny things that had no memory. She hated politics. She refused to listen to the news. Pol Pot's beautiful daughter wished the current leadership would behave decently, like her dad always did. To her.

She remembered the sound of her father's gentle voice. She remembered

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sitting on his lap in a forest enclosure, being bitten by mosquitoes. Memories of malaria had sunk into her very bones. She now associated forests with nausea, fevers, and pain. A flicker of tree-shade on her skin made her want to throw up and the odor of soil or fallen leaves made her gag. She had never been to Angkor Wat. She read nothing.

Sith shopped. Her driver was paid by the government and always carried an AK-47, but his wife, the housekeeper, had no idea who Sith was. The house was full of swept marble, polished teak furniture, iPods, Xboxes, and plasma screens.

Please remember that every word of this story is a lie. Pol Pot was no doubt a dedicated communist who made no money from ruling Cambodia. Nevertheless, a hefty allowance arrived for Sith every month from an account in Switzerland.

Nothing touched Sith, until she fell in love with the salesman at Hello Phones.

Cambodian readers may know that in 2004 there was no mobile phone shop in Soriya Market. However, there was a branch of Hello Phone Cards that had a round blue sales counter with orange trim. This shop looked like that.

Every day Sith bought or exchanged a mobile phone there. She would sit and flick her hair at the salesman.

His name was Dara, which means Star. Dara knew about deals on call prices, sim cards, and the new phones that showed videos. He could get her any call tone she liked.

Talking to Dara broke none of Sith's rules. He wasn't fat, nor was he well dressed, and far from being a teenager, he was a comfortably mature twenty-four years old.

One day, Dara chuckled and said, "As a friend I advise you, you don't need another mobile phone."

Sith wrinkled her nose. "I don't like this one anymore. It's blue. I want something more feminine. But not frilly. And it should have better sound quality."

"Okay, but you could save your money and buy some more nice clothes."

Pol Pot's beautiful daughter lowered her chin, which she knew made her neck look long and graceful. "Do you like my clothes?"

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"Why ask me?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. It's good to check out your look."

Dara nodded. "You look cool. What does your sister say?"

Sith let him know she had no family. "Ah," he said and quickly changed the subject. That was terrific. Secrecy and sympathy in one easy movement.

Sith came back the next day and said that she'd decided that the rose-colored phone was too feminine. Dara laughed aloud and his eyes sparkled. Sith had come late in the morning just so that he could ask this question. "Are you hungry? Do you want to meet for lunch?"

Would he think she was cheap if she said yes? Would he say she was snobby if she said no?

"Just so long as we eat in Soriya Market," she said.

She was torn between BBWorld Burgers and Lucky7. BBWorld was big, round, and just two floors down from the dome. Lucky7 Burgers was part of the Lucky Supermarket, such a good store that a tiny jar of Maxwell House cost US$2.40.

They decided on BBWorld. It was full of light and they could see the town spread out through the wide clean windows. Sith sat in silence.

Pol Pot's daughter had nothing to say unless she was buying something.

Or rather she had only one thing to say, but she must never say it.

Dara did all the talking. He talked about how the guys on the third floor could get him a deal on original copies of *Grand Theft Auto*. He hinted that he could get Sith discounts from Bsfashion, the spotlit modern shop one floor down.

Suddenly he stopped. "You don't need to be afraid of me, you know." He said it in a kindly, grownup voice. "I can see, you're a properly brought up girl. I like that. It's nice."

Sith still couldn't find anything to say. She could only nod. She wanted to run away.

"Would you like to go to K-Four?"

K-Four, the big electronics shop, stocked all the reliable brand names: Hitachi, Sony, Panasonic, Philips, or Denon. It was so expensive that almost nobody shopped there, which is why Sith liked it. A crowd of people stood outside and stared through the window at a huge home

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entertainment center showing a DVD of *Ice Age*. On the screen, a little animal was being chased by a glacier. It was so beautiful!

Sith finally found something to say. "If I had one of those, I would never need to leave the house."

Dara looked at her sideways and decided to laugh.

The next day Sith told him that all the phones she had were too big. Did he have one that she could wear around her neck like jewelry?

This time they went to Lucky7 Burgers, and sat across from the Revlon counter. They watched boys having their hair layered by Revlon's natural beauty specialists.

Dara told her more about himself. His father had died in the wars. His family now lived in the country. Sith's Coca-Cola suddenly tasted of anti-malarial drugs.

"But...you don't want to *live* in the country," she said.

"No. I have to live in Phnom Penh to make money. But my folks are good country people. Modest." He smiled, embarrassed.

They'll have hens and a cousin who shimmies up coconut trees. There will be trees all around but no shops anywhere. The earth will smell.

Sith couldn't finish her drink. She sighed and smiled and said abruptly, "I'm sorry. It's been cool. But I have to go." She slunk sideways out of her seat as slowly as molasses.

Walking back into the jewelry rotunda with nothing to do, she realized that Dara would think she didn't like him.

And that made the lower part of her eyes sting.

She went back the next day and didn't even pretend to buy a mobile phone. She told Dara that she'd left so suddenly the day before because she'd remembered a hair appointment.

He said that he could see she took a lot of trouble with her hair. Then he asked her out for a movie that night.

Sith spent all day shopping in K-Four.

They met at six. Dara was so considerate that he didn't even suggest the horror movie. He said he wanted to see *Buffalo Girl Hiding*, a movie about a country girl who lives on a farm. Sith said with great feeling that she would prefer the horror movie.

The cinema on the top floor opened out directly onto the roof of

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Soriya. Graffiti had been scratched into the green railings. Why would people want to ruin something new and beautiful? Sith put her arm through Dara's and knew that they were now boyfriend and girlfriend.

"Finally," he said.

"Finally what?"

"You've done something."

They leaned on the railings and looked out over other people's apartments. West toward the river was a building with one huge roof terrace. Women met there to gossip. Children were playing toss-the-sandal. From this distance, Sith was enchanted.

"I just love watching the children."

The movie, from Thailand, was about a woman whose face turns blue and spotty and who eats men. The blue woman was yucky, but not as scary as all the badly dubbed voices. The characters sounded possessed. It was though Thai people had been taken over by the spirits of dead Cambodians.

Whenever Sith got scared, she chuckled.

So she sat chuckling with terror. Dara thought she was laughing at a dumb movie and found such intelligence charming. He started to chuckle too. Sith thought he was as frightened as she was. Together in the dark, they took each other's hands.

Outside afterward, the air hung hot even in the dark and 142nd Street smelled of drains. Sith stood on tiptoe to avoid the oily deposits and cast-off fishbones.

Dara said, "I will drive you home."

"My driver can take us," said Sith, flipping open her Kermit-the-Frog mobile.

Her black Mercedes Benz edged to a halt, crunching old plastic bottles in the gutter. The seats were upholstered with tan leather and the driver was armed.

Dara's jaw dropped. "Who...*who* is your father?"

"He's dead."

Dara shook his head. "Who was he?"

Normally Sith used her mother's family name, but that would not answer this question. Flustered, she tried to think of someone who could be her father. She knew of nobody the right age. She remembered

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something about a politician who had died. His name came to her and she said it in panic. "My father was Kol Vireakboth." Had she got the name right? "Please don't tell anyone."

Dara covered his eyes. "We — my family, my father — we fought for the KPLA."

Sith had to stop herself asking what the KPLA was.

Kol Vireakboth had led a faction in the civil wars. It fought against the Khmer Rouge, the Vietnamese, the King, and corruption. It wanted a new way for Cambodia. Kol Vireakboth was a Cambodian leader who had never told a lie and or accepted a bribe.

Remember that this is an untrue story.

Dara started to back away from the car. "I don't think we should be doing this. I'm just a villager, really."

"That doesn't matter."

His eyes closed. "I would expect nothing less from the daughter of Kol Vireakboth."

Oh for gosh sake, she just picked the man's name out of the air, she didn't need more problems. "Please!" she said.

Dara sighed. "Okay. I said I would see you home safely. I will." Inside the Mercedes, he stroked the tan leather.

When they arrived, he craned his neck to look up at the building. "Which floor are you on?"

"All of them."

Color drained from his face.

"My driver will take you back," she said to Dara. As the car pulled away, she stood outside the closed garage shutters, waving forlornly.

Then Sith panicked. Who was Kol Vireakboth? She went online and Googled. She had to read about the wars. Her skin started to creep. All those different factions swam in her head: ANS, NADK, KPR, and KPNLF. The very names seemed to come at her spoken by forgotten voices.

Soon she had all she could stand. She printed out Vireakboth's picture and decided to have it framed. In case Dara visited.

Kol Vireakboth had a round face and a fatherly smile. His eyes seemed to slant upward toward his nose, looking full of kindly insight. He'd been killed by a car bomb.

All that night, Sith heard whispering.

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In the morning, there was another picture of someone else in the tray of her printer.

A long-faced, buck-toothed woman stared out at her in black and white. Sith noted the victim's fashion lapses. The woman's hair was a mess, all frizzy. She should have had it straightened and put in some nice highlights. The woman's eyes drilled into her.

"Can't touch me," said Sith. She left the photo in the tray. She went to see Dara, right away, no breakfast.

His eyes were circled with dark flesh and his blue Hello trousers and shirt were not properly ironed.

"Buy the whole shop," Dara said, looking deranged. "The guys in K-Four just told me some girl in blue jeans walked in yesterday and bought two home theatres. One for the salon, she said, and one for the roof terrace. She paid for both of them in full and had them delivered to the far end of Monivong."

Sith sighed. "I'm sending one back." She hoped that sounded abstemious. "It looked too metallic against my curtains."

Pause.

"She also bought an Aido robot dog for fifteen hundred dollars."

Sith would have preferred that Dara did not know about the dog. It was just a silly toy; it hadn't occured to her that it might cost that much until she saw the bill. "They should not tell everyone about their customers' business or soon they will have no customers."

Dara was looking at her as if thinking: *This is not just a nice sweet girl.*

"I had fun last night," Sith said in a voice as thin as high clouds.

"So did I."

"We don't have to tell anyone about my family. Do we?" Sith was seriously scared of losing him.

"No. But Sith, it's stupid. Your family, my family, we are not equals."

"It doesn't make any difference."

"You lied to me. Your family is not dead. You have famous uncles."

She did indeed — Uncle Ieng Sary, Uncle Khieu Samphan, Uncle Ta Mok. All the Pol Pot clique had been called her uncles.

"I didn't know them that well," she said. That was true, too.

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What would she do if she couldn't shop in Soriya Market anymore? What would she do without Dara?

She begged. "I am not a strong person. Sometimes I think I am not a person at all. I'm just a space."

Dara looked suddenly mean. "You're just a credit card." Then his face fell. "I'm sorry. That was an unkind thing to say. You are very young for your age and I'm older than you and I should have treated you with more care."

Sith was desperate. "All my money would be very nice."

"I'm not for sale."

He worked in a shop and would be sending money home to a fatherless family; of course he was for sale!

Sith had a small heart, but a big head for thinking. She knew that she had to do this delicately, like picking a flower, or she would spoil the bloom. "Let's...let's just go see a movie?"

After all, she was beautiful and well brought up and she knew her eyes were big and round. Her tiny heart was aching.

This time they saw *Tum Teav*, a remake of an old movie from the 1960s. If movies were not nightmares about ghosts, then they tried to preserve the past. *When,* thought Sith, *will they make a movie about Cambodia's future? Tum Teav* was based on a classic tale of a young monk who falls in love with a properly brought up girl but her mother opposes the match. They commit suicide at the end, bringing a curse on their village. Sith sat through it stony-faced. *I am not going to be a dead heroine in a romance.*

Dara offered to drive her home again and that's when Sith found out that he drove a Honda Dream. He proudly presented to her the gleaming motorcycle of fast young men. Sith felt backed into a corner. She'd already offered to buy him. Showing-off her car again might humiliate him.

So she broke rule number seven.

Dara hid her bag in the back and they went soaring down Monivong Boulevard at night, past homeless people, prostitutes, and chefs staggering home after work. It was late in the year, but it started to rain.

Sith loved it, the cool air brushing against her face, the cooler rain clinging to her eyelashes.

She remembered being five years old in the forest and dancing in the

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monsoon. She encircled Dara's waist to stay on the bike and suddenly found her cheek was pressed up against his back. She giggled in fear, not of the rain, but of what she felt.

He dropped her off at home. Inside, everything was dark except for the flickering green light on her printer. In the tray were two new photographs. One was of a child, a little boy, holding up a school prize certificate. The other was a tough, wise-looking old man, with a string of muscle down either side of his ironic, bitter smile. They looked directly at her.

They know who I am.

As she climbed the stairs to her bedroom, she heard someone sobbing, far away, as if the sound came from next door. She touched the walls of the staircase. They shivered slightly, constricting in time to the cries.

In her bedroom she extracted one of her many iPods from the tangle of wires and listened to *System of a Down*, as loud as she could. It helped her sleep. The sound of nu-metal guitars seemed to come roaring out of her own heart.

She was woken up in the sun-drenched morning by the sound of her doorbell many floors down. She heard the housekeeper Jorani call and the door open. Sith hesitated over choice of jeans and top. By the time she got downstairs she found the driver and the housemaid joking with Dara, giving him tea.

Like the sunshine, Dara seemed to disperse ghosts.

"Hi," he said. "It's my day off. I thought we could go on a motorcycle ride to the country."

But not to the country. Couldn't they just spend the day in Soriya? No, said Dara, there's lots of other places to see in Phnom Penh.

He drove her, twisting through back streets. How did the city get so poor? How did it get so dirty?

They went to a new and modern shop for CDs that was run by a record label. Dara knew all the cool new music, most of it influenced by Khmer-Americans returning from Long Beach and Compton: Sdey, Phnom Penh Bad Boys, Khmer Kid.

Sith bought twenty CDs.

They went to the National Museum and saw the beautiful Buddha-like head of King Jayavarman VII. Dara without thinking ducked and held

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up his hands in prayer. They had dinner in a French restaurant with candles and wine, and it was just like in a karaoke video, a boy, a girl, and her money all going out together. They saw the show at Sovanna Phum, and there was a wonderful dance piece with sampled 1940s music from an old French movie, with traditional Khmer choreography.

Sith went home, her heart singing, *Dara, Dara, Dara.*

In the bedroom, a mobile phone began to ring, over and over. *Call 1* said the screen, but gave no name or number, so the person was not on Sith's list of contacts.

She turned off the phone. It kept ringing. That's when she knew for certain.

She hid the phone in a pillow in the spare bedroom and put another pillow on top of it and then closed the door.

All forty-two of her mobile phones started to ring. They rang from inside closets, or from the bathroom where she had forgotten them. They rang from the roof terrace and even from inside a shoe under her bed.

"I am a very stubborn girl!" she shouted at the spirits. "You do not scare me."

She turned up her iPod and finally slept.

As soon as the sun was up, she roused her driver, slumped deep in his hammock.

"Come on, we're going to Soriya Market," she said.

The driver looked up at her dazed, then remembered to smile and lower his head in respect.

His face fell when she showed up in the garage with all forty-two of her mobile phones in one black bag.

It was too early for Soriya Market to open. They drove in circles with sunrise blazing directly into their eyes. On the streets, men pushed carts like beasts of burden, or carried cascades of belts into the old Central Market. The old market was domed, art deco, the color of vomit, French. Sith never shopped there.

"Maybe you should go visit your Mom," said the driver. "You know, she loves you. Families are there for when you are in trouble."

Sith's mother lived in Thailand and they never spoke. Her mother's family kept asking for favors: money, introductions, or help with getting a job. Sith didn't speak to them any longer.

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"My family is only trouble."

The driver shut up and drove.

Finally Soriya opened. Sith went straight to Dara's shop and dumped all the phones on the blue countertop. "Can you take these back?"

"We only do exchanges. I can give a new phone for an old one." Dara looked thoughtful. "Don't worry. Leave them here with me, I'll go sell them to a guy in the old market, and give you your money tomorrow." He smiled in approval. "This is very sensible."

He passed one phone back, the one with video and email. "This is the best one, keep this."

Dara was so competent. Sith wanted to sink down onto him like a pillow and stay there. She sat in the shop all day, watching him work. One of the guys from the games shop upstairs asked, "Who is this beautiful girl?"

Dara answered proudly, "My girlfriend."

Dara drove her back on the Dream and at the door to her house, he chuckled. "I don't want to go." She pressed a finger against his naughty lips, and smiled and spun back inside from happiness.

She was in the ground-floor garage. She heard something like a rat scuttle. In her bag, the telephone rang. Who were these people to importune her, even if they were dead? She wrenched the mobile phone out of her bag and pushed the green button and put the phone to her ear. She waited. There was a sound like wind.

A child spoke to her, his voice clogged as if he was crying. "They tied my thumbs together."

Sith demanded. "How did you get my number?"

"I'm all alone!"

"Then ring somebody else. Someone in your family."

"All my family are dead. I don't know where I am. My name is...."

Sith clicked the phone off. She opened the trunk of the car and tossed the phone inside it. Being telephoned by ghosts was so...*unmodern*. How could Cambodia become a number one country if its cell phone network was haunted?

She stormed up into the salon. On top of a table, the $1500, no-mess dog stared at her from out of his packaging. Sith clumped up the stairs onto the roof terrace to sleep as far away as she could from everything in the house.

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She woke up in the dark, to hear thumping from downstairs.

The sound was metallic and hollow, as if someone were locked in the car. Sith turned on her iPod. Something was making the sound of the music skip. She fought the tangle of wires, and wrenched out another player, a Xen, but it too skipped, burping the sound of speaking voices into the middle of the music.

Had she heard a ripping sound? She pulled out the earphones, and heard something climbing the stairs.

A sound of light, uneven lolloping. She thought of crippled children. Frost settled over her like a heavy blanket and she could not move.

The robot dog came whirring up onto the terrace. It paused at the top of the stairs, its camera nose pointing at her to see, its useless eyes glowing cherry red.

The robot dog said in a warm, friendly voice, "My name is Phalla. I tried to buy my sister medicine and they killed me for it."

Sith tried to say, "Go away," but her throat wouldn't open.

The dog tilted its head. "No one even knows I'm dead. What will you do for all the people who are not mourned?"

Laughter blurted out of her, and Sith saw it rise up as cold vapor into the air.

"We have no one to invite us to the feast," said the dog.

Sith giggled in terror. "Nothing. I can do nothing!" she said, shaking her head.

"You laugh?" The dog gathered itself and jumped up into the hammock with her. It turned and lifted up its clear plastic tail and laid a genuine turd alongside Sith. Short brown hair was wound up in it, a scalp actually, and a single flat white human tooth smiled out of it.

Sith squawked and overturned both herself and the dog out of the hammock and onto the floor. The dog pushed its nose up against hers and began to sing an old-fashioned children's song about birds.

Something heavy huffed its way up the stairwell toward her. Sith shivered with cold on the floor and could not move. The dog went on singing in a high, sweet voice. A large shadow loomed out over the top of the staircase, and Sith gargled, swallowing laughter, trying to speak.

"There was thumping in the car and no one in it," said the driver.

Sith sagged toward the floor with relief. "The ghosts," she said.

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"They're back." She thrust herself to her feet. "We're getting out now. Ring the Hilton. Find out if they have rooms."

She kicked the toy dog down the stairs ahead of her. "We're moving now!"

Together they all loaded the car, shaking. Once again, the house was left to ghosts. As they drove, the mobile phone rang over and over inside the trunk.

The new Hilton (which does not exist) rose up by the river across from the Department for Cults and Religious Affairs. Tall and marbled and pristine, it had crystal chandeliers and fountains, and wood and brass handles in the elevators.

In the middle of the night only the Bridal Suite was still available, but it had an extra parental chamber where the driver and his wife could sleep. High on the twenty-first floor, the night sparkled with lights and everything was hushed, as far away from Cambodia as it was possible to get.

Things were quiet after that, for a while.

Every day she and Dara went to movies, or went to a restaurant. They went shopping. She slipped him money and he bought himself a beautiful suit. He said, over a hamburger at Lucky7, "I've told my mother that I've met a girl."

Sith smiled and thought: and I bet you told her that I'm rich.

"I've decided to live in the Hilton," she told him.

Maybe we could live in the Hilton. A pretty smile could hint at that.

The rainy season ended. The last of the monsoons rose up dark gray with a froth of white cloud on top, looking exactly like a giant wave about to break.

Dry cooler air arrived.

After work was over Dara convinced her to go for a walk along the river in front of the Royal Palace. He went to the men's room to change into a new luxury suit and Sith thought: he's beginning to imagine life with all that money.

As they walked along the river, exposed to all those people, Sith shook inside. There were teenage boys everywhere. Some of them were in rags, which was reassuring, but some of them were very well dressed indeed, the sons of Impunity who could do anything. Sith swerved suddenly to avoid even seeing them. But Dara in his new beige suit looked like one of

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them, and the generals' sons nodded to him with quizzical eyebrows, perhaps wondering who he was.

In front of the palace, a pavilion reached out over the water. Next to it a traditional orchestra bashed and wailed out something old fashioned. Hundreds of people crowded around a tiny wat. Dara shook Sith's wrist and they stood up to see.

People held up bundles of lotus flowers and incense in prayer. They threw the bundles into the wat. Monks immediately shoveled the joss sticks and flowers out of the back.

Behind the wat, children wearing T-shirts and shorts black with filth rootled through the dead flowers, the smoldering incense, and old coconut shells.

Sith asked, "Why do they do that?"

"You are so innocent!" chuckled Dara and shook his head. The evening was blue and gold. Sith had time to think that she did not want to go back to a hotel and that the only place she really felt happy was next to Dara. All around that thought was something dark and tangled.

Dara suggested with affection that they should get married.

It was as if Sith had her answer ready. "No, absolutely not," she said at once. "How can you ask that? There is not even anyone for you to ask! Have you spoken to your family about me? Has your family made any checks about my background?"

Which was what she really wanted to know.

Dara shook his head. "I have explained that you are an orphan, but they are not concerned with that. We are modest people. They will be happy if I am happy."

"Of course they won't be! Of course they will need to do checks."

Sith scowled. She saw her way to sudden advantage. "At least they must consult fortunetellers. They are not fools. I can help them. Ask them the names of the fortunetellers they trust."

Dara smiled shyly. "We have no money."

"I will give them money and you can tell them that you pay."

Dara's eyes searched her face. "I don't want that."

"How will we know if it is a good marriage? And your poor mother, how can you ask her to make a decision like this without information? So. You ask your family for the names of good professionals they trust, and I

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will pay them, and I will go to Prime Minister Hun Sen's own personal fortuneteller, and we can compare results."

Thus she established again both her propriety and her status.

In an old romance, the parents would not approve of the match and the fortuneteller would say that the marriage was ill-omened. Sith left nothing to romance.

She offered the family's fortunetellers whatever they wanted — a car, a farm — and in return demanded a written copy of their judgment. All of them agreed that the portents for the marriage were especially auspicious.

Then she secured an appointment with the Prime Minister's fortuneteller.

Hun Sen's *Kru Taey* was a lady in a black business suit. She had long fingernails like talons, but they were perfectly manicured and frosted white.

She was the kind of fortuneteller who is possessed by someone else's spirit. She sat at a desk and looked at Sith as unblinking as a fish, both her hands steepled together. After the most basic of hellos, she said. "Dollars only. Twenty-five thousand. I need to buy my son an apartment."

"That's a very high fee," said Sith.

"It's not a fee. It is a consideration for giving you the answer you want. My fee is another twenty-five thousand dollars."

They negotiated. Sith liked the Kru Taey's manner. It confirmed everything Sith believed about life.

The fee was reduced somewhat but not the consideration.

"Payment upfront now," the Kru Taey said. She wouldn't take a check. Like only the very best restaurants she accepted foreign credit cards. Sith's Swiss card worked immediately. It had unlimited credit in case she had to leave the country in a hurry.

The Kru Taey said, "I will tell the boy's family that the marriage will be particularly fortunate."

Sith realized that she had not yet said anything about a boy, his family, or a marriage.

The Kru Taey smiled. "I know you are not interested in your real fortune. But to be kind, I will tell you unpaid that this marriage really is particularly well favored. All the other fortunetellers would have said the same thing without being bribed."

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The Kru Taey's eyes glinted in the most unpleasant way. "So you needn't have bought them farms or paid me an extra twenty-five thousand dollars."

She looked down at her perfect fingernails. "You will be very happy indeed. But not before your entire life is overturned."

The back of Sith's arms prickled as if from cold. She should have been angry but she could feel herself smiling. Why?

And why waste politeness on the old witch? Sith turned to go without saying good-bye.

"Oh, and about your other problem," said the woman.

Sith turned back and waited.

"Enemies," said the Kru Taey, "can turn out to be friends."

Sith sighed. "What are you talking about?"

The Kru Taey's smile was a wide as a tiger-trap. "The million people your father killed."

Sith went hard. "Not a million," she said. "Somewhere between two hundred and fifty and five hundred thousand."

"Enough," smiled the Kru Taey. "My father was one of them." She smiled for a moment longer. "I will be sure to tell the Prime Minister that you visited me."

Sith snorted as if in scorn. "I will tell him myself."

But she ran back to her car.

That night, Sith looked down on all the lights like diamonds. She settled onto the giant mattress and turned on her iPod.

Someone started to yell at her. She pulled out the earpieces and jumped to the window. It wouldn't open. She shook it and wrenched its frame until it reluctantly slid an inch and she threw the iPod out of the twenty-first-floor window.

She woke up late the next morning, to hear the sound of the TV. She opened up the double doors into the salon and saw Jorani, pressed against the wall.

"The TV...," Jorani said, her eyes wide with terror.

The driver waited by his packed bags. He stood up, looking as mournful as a bloodhound.

On the widescreen TV there was what looked like a pop music karaoke video. Except that the music was very old fashioned. Why would

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a pop video show a starving man eating raw maize in a field? He glanced over his shoulder in terror as he ate. The glowing singalong words were the song that the dog had sung at the top of the stairs. The starving man looked up at Sith and corn mash rolled out of his mouth.

"It's all like that," said the driver. "I unplugged the set, but it kept playing on every channel." He sompiahed but looked miserable. "My wife wants to leave."

Sith felt shame. It was miserable and dirty, being infested with ghosts. Of course they would want to go.

"It's okay. I can take taxis," she said.

The driver nodded, and went into the next room and whispered to his wife. With little scurrying sounds, they gathered up their things. They sompiahed, and apologized.

The door clicked almost silently behind them.

It will always be like this, thought Sith. Wherever I go. It would be like this with Dara.

The hotel telephone started to ring. Sith left it ringing. She covered the TV with a blanket, but the terrible, tinny old music kept wheedling and rattling its way out at her, and she sat on the edge of her bed, staring into space.

I'll have to leave Cambodia.

At the market, Dara looked even more cheerful than usual. The fortunetellers had pronounced the marriage as very favorable. His mother had invited Sith home for the Pchum Ben festival.

"We can take the bus tomorrow," he said.

"Does it smell? All those people in one place?"

"It smells of air freshener. Then we take a taxi, and then you will have to walk up the track." Dara suddenly doubled up in laughter. "Oh, it will be good for you."

"Will there be dirt?"

"Everywhere! Oh, your dirty Nikes will earn you much merit!"

But at least, thought Sith, there will be no TV or phones.

Two days later, Sith was walking down a dirt track, ducking tree branches. Dust billowed all over her shoes. Dara walked behind her, chuckling, which meant she thought he was scared too.

She heard a strange rattling sound. "What's that noise?"

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"It's a goat," he said. "My mother bought it for me in April as a present."

A goat. How could they be any more rural? Sith had never seen a goat. She never even imagined that she would.

Dara explained. "I sell them to the Muslims. It is Agricultural Diversification."

There were trees everywhere, shadows crawling across the ground like snakes. Sith felt sick. *One mosquito,* she promised herself, *just one and I will squeal and run away.*

The house was tiny, on thin twisting stilts. She had pictured a big fine country house standing high over the ground on concrete pillars with a sunburst carving in the gable. The kitchen was a hut that sat directly on the ground, no stilts, and it was made of palm-leaf panels and there was no electricity. The strip light in the ceiling was attached to a car battery and they kept a live fire on top of the concrete table to cook. Everything smelled of burnt fish.

Sith loved it.

Inside the hut, the smoke from the fires kept the mosquitoes away. Dara's mother, Mrs. Non Kunthea, greeted her with a smile. That triggered a respectful sompiah from Sith, the prayer-like gesture leaping out of her unbidden. On the platform table was a plastic sack full of dried prawns.

Without thinking, Sith sat on the table and began to pull the salty prawns out of their shells.

Why am I doing this?

Because it's what I did at home.

Sith suddenly remembered the enclosure in the forest, a circular fenced area. Daddy had slept in one house, and the women in another. Sith would talk to the cooks. For something to do, she would chop vegetables or shell prawns. Then Daddy would come to eat and he'd sit on the platform table and she, little Sith, would sit between his knees.

Dara's older brother Yuth came back for lunch. He was pot-bellied and drove a taxi for a living, and he moved in hard jabs like an angry old man. He reached too far for the rice and Sith could smell his armpits.

"You see how we live," Yuth said to Sith. "This is what we get for having the wrong patron. Sihanouk thought we were anti-monarchist. To Hun Sen, we were the enemy. Remember the Work for Money program?"

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No.

"They didn't give any of those jobs to us. We might as well have been the Khmer Rouge!"

The past, thought Sith, *why don't they just let it go? Why do they keep boasting about their old wars?*

Mrs. Non Kunthea chuckled with affection. "My eldest son was born angry," she said. "His slogan is 'ten years is not too late for revenge.'".

Yuth started up again. "They treat that old monster Pol Pot better than they treat us. But then, he was an important person. If you go to his stupa in Anlong Veng, you will see that people leave offerings! They ask him for lottery numbers!"

He crumpled his green, soft, old-fashioned hat back onto his head and said, "Nice to meet you, Sith. Dara, she's too high class for the likes of you." But he grinned as he said it. He left, swirling disruption in his wake.

The dishes were gathered. Again without thinking, Sith swept up the plastic tub and carried it to the blackened branches. They rested over puddles where the washing-up water drained.

"You shouldn't work," said Dara's mother. "You are a guest."

"I grew up in a refugee camp," said Sith. After all, it was true.

Dara looked at her with a mix of love, pride, and gratitude for the good fortune of a rich wife who works.

And that was the best Sith could hope for. This family would be fine for her.

In the late afternoon, all four brothers came with their wives for the end of Pchum Ben, when the ghosts of the dead can wander the Earth. People scatter rice on the temple floors to feed their families. Some ghosts have small mouths so special rice is used.

Sith never took part in Pchum Ben. How could she go the temple and scatter rice for Pol Pot?

The family settled in the kitchen chatting and joking, and it all passed in a blur for Sith. Everyone else had family they could honor. To Sith's surprise one of the uncles suggested that people should write names of the deceased and burn them, to transfer merit. It was nothing to do with Pchum Ben, but a lovely idea, so all the family wrote down names.

Sith sat with her hands jammed under her arms.

Dara's mother asked, "Isn't there a name you want to write, Sith?"

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"No," said Sith in a tiny voice. How could she write the name Pol Pot? He was surely roaming the world let loose from hell. "There is no one."

Dara rubbed her hand. "Yes there is, Sith. A very special name."

"No, there's not."

Dara thought she didn't want them to know her father was Kol Vireakboth. He leant forward and whispered. "I promise. No one will see it."

Sith's breath shook. She took the paper and started to cry.

"Oh," said Dara's mother, stricken with sympathy. "Everyone in this country has a tragedy."

Sith wrote the name Kol Vireakboth.

Dara kept the paper folded and caught Sith's eyes. *You see?* he seemed to say. *I have kept your secret safe.* The paper burned.

Thunder slapped a clear sky about the face. It had been sunny, but now as suddenly as a curtain dropped down over a doorway, rain fell. A wind came from nowhere, tearing away a flap of palm-leaf wall, as if forcing entrance in a fury.

The family whooped and laughed and let the rain drench their shoulders as they stood up to push the wall back down, to keep out the rain.

But Sith knew. Her father's enemy was in the kitchen.

The rain passed; the sun came out. The family chuckled and sat back down around or on the table. They lowered dishes of food and ate, making parcels of rice and fish with their fingers. Sith sat rigidly erect, waiting for misfortune.

What would the spirit of Kol Vireakboth do to Pol Pot's daughter? Would he overturn the table, soiling her with food? Would he send mosquitoes to bite and make her sick? Would he suck away all her good fortune, leaving the marriage blighted, her new family estranged?

Or would a kindly spirit simply wish that the children of all Cambodians could escape, escape the past?

Suddenly, Sith felt at peace. The sunlight and shadows looked new to her and her senses started to work in magic ways.

She smelled a perfume of emotion, sweet and bracing at the same time. The music from a neighbor's cassette player touched her arm gently. Words took the form of sunlight on her skin.

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No one is evil, the sunlight said. *But they can be false.*

False, how? Sith asked without speaking, genuinely baffled.

The sunlight smiled with an old man's stained teeth. *You know very well how.*

All the air swelled with the scent of the food, savoring it. The trees sighed with satisfaction.

Life is true. Sith saw steam from the rice curl up into the branches. *Death is false.*

The sunlight stood up to go. It whispered. *Tell him.*

The world faded back to its old self.

That night in a hammock in a room with the other women, Sith suddenly sat bolt upright. Clarity would not let her sleep. She saw that there was no way ahead. She couldn't marry Dara. How could she ask him to marry someone who was harassed by one million dead? How could she explain I am haunted because I am Pol Pot's daughter and I have lied about everything?

The dead would not let her marry; the dead would not let her have joy. So who could Pol Pot's daughter pray to? Where could she go for wisdom?

Loak kru Kol Vireakboth, she said under her breath. *Please show me a way ahead.*

The darkness was sterner than the sunlight.

To be as false as you are, it said, *you first have to lie to yourself.*

What lies had Sith told? She knew the facts. Her father had been the head of a government that tortured and killed hundreds of thousands of people and starved the nation through mismanagement. I know the truth.

I just never think about it.

I've never faced it.

Well, the truth is as dark as I am, and you live in me, the darkness.

She had read books — well, the first chapter of books — and then dropped them as if her fingers were scalded. There was no truth for her in books. The truth ahead of her would be loneliness, dreary adulthood, and penance.

Grow up.

The palm-leaf panels stirred like waiting ghosts.

All through the long bus ride back, she said nothing. Dara went silent too, and hung his head.

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In the huge and empty hotel suite, darkness awaited her. She'd had the phone and the TV removed; her footsteps sounded hollow. Jorani and the driver had been her only friends.

The next day she did not go to Soriya Market. She went instead to the torture museum of Tuol Sleng.

A cadre of young motoboys waited outside the hotel in baseball caps and bling. Instead, Sith hailed a sweet-faced older motoboy with a battered, rusty bike.

As they drove she asked him about his family. He lived alone and had no one except for his mother in Kompong Thom.

Outside the gates of Tuol Sleng he said, "This was my old school."

In one wing there were rows of rooms with one iron bed in each with handcuffs and stains on the floor. Photos on the wall showed twisted bodies chained to those same beds as they were found on the day of liberation. In one photograph, a chair was overturned as if in a hurry.

Sith stepped outside and looked instead at a beautiful house over the wall across the street. It was a high white house like her own, with pillars and a roof terrace and bougainvillaea, a modern daughter's house. What do they think when they look out from that roof terrace? How can they live here?

The grass was tended and full of hopping birds. People were painting the shutters of the prison a fresh blue-gray.

In the middle wing, the rooms were galleries of photographed faces. They stared out at her like the faces from her printer. Were some of them the same?

"Who are they?" she found herself asking a Cambodian visitor.

"Their own," the woman replied. "This is where they sent Khmer Rouge cadres who had fallen out of favor. They would not waste such torture on ordinary Cambodians."

Some of the faces were young and beautiful men. Some were children or dignified old women.

The Cambodian lady kept pace with her. Company? Did she guess who Sith was? "They couldn't simply beat party cadres to death. They sent them and their entire families here. The children too, the grandmothers. They had different days of the week for killing children and wives."

An innocent looking man smiled out at the camera as sweetly as her

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aged motoboy, directly into the camera of his torturers. He seemed to expect kindness from them, and decency. *Comrades*, he seemed to say.

The face in the photograph moved. It smiled more broadly and was about to speak.

Sith eyes darted away. The next face sucked all her breath away.

It was not a stranger. It was Dara, her Dara, in black shirt and black cap. She gasped and looked back at the lady. Her pinched and solemn face nodded up and down. Was she a ghost too?

Sith reeled outside and hid her face and didn't know if she could go on standing. Tears slid down her face and she wanted to be sick and she turned her back so no one could see.

Then she walked to the motoboy, sitting in a shelter. In complete silence, she got on his bike feeling angry at the place, angry at the government for preserving it, angry at the foreigners who visited it like a tourist attraction, angry at everything.

That is not who we are! That is not what I am!

The motoboy slipped onto his bike, and Sith asked him: What happened to your family? It was a cruel question. He had to smile and look cheerful. His father had run a small shop; they went out into the country and never came back. He lived with his brother in a jeum-room, a refugee camp in Thailand. They came back to fight the Vietnamese and his brother was killed.

She was going to tell the motoboy, drive me back to the Hilton, but she felt ashamed. Of what? Just how far was she going to run?

She asked him to take her to the old house on Monivong Boulevard.

As the motorcycle wove through back streets, dodging red-earth ruts and pedestrians, she felt rage at her father. How dare he involve her in something like that! Sith had lived a small life and had no measure of things so she thought: *it's as if someone tinted my hair and it all fell out. It's as if someone pierced my ears and they got infected and my whole ear rotted away.*

She remembered that she had never felt any compassion for her father. She had been twelve years old when he stood trial, old and sick and making such a show of leaning on his stick. Everything he did was a show. She remembered rolling her eyes in constant embarrassment. Oh, he was fine in front of rooms full of adoring students. He could play the *bong thom*

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with them. They thought he was enlightened. He sounded good, using his false, soft and kindly little voice, as if he was dubbed. He had made Sith recite Verlaine, Rimbaud, and Rilke. He killed thousands for having foreign influences.

I don't know what I did in a previous life to deserve you for a father. But you were not my father in a previous life and you won't be my father in the next. I reject you utterly. I will never burn your name. You can wander hungry out of hell every year for all eternity. I will pray to keep you in hell.

I am not your daughter!

If you were false, I have to be true.

Her old house looked abandoned in the stark afternoon light, closed and innocent. At the doorstep she turned and thrust a fistful of dollars into the motoboy's hand. She couldn't think straight; she couldn't even see straight, her vision blurred.

Back inside, she calmly put down her teddy-bear rucksack and walked upstairs to her office. Aido the robot dog whirred his way toward her. She had broken his back leg kicking him downstairs. He limped, whimpering like a dog, and lowered his head to have it stroked.

To her relief, there was only one picture waiting for her in the tray of the printer.

Kol Vireakboth looked out at her, middle-aged, handsome, worn, wise. Pity and kindness glowed in his eyes.

The land line began to ring.

"*Youl prom,*" she told the ghosts. Agreed.

She picked up the receiver and waited.

A man spoke. "My name was Yin Bora." His voice bubbled up brokenly as if from underwater.

A light blinked in the printer. A photograph slid out quickly. A young student stared out at her looking happy at a family feast. He had a Beatle haircut and a striped shirt.

"That's me," said the voice on the phone. "I played football."

Sith coughed. "What do you want me to do?"

"Write my name," said the ghost.

"Please hold the line," said Sith, in a hypnotized voice. She fumbled for a pen, and then wrote on the photograph *Yin Bora, footballer*. He

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looked so sweet and happy. "You have no one to mourn you," she realized.

"None of us have anyone left alive to mourn us," said the ghost.

Then there was a terrible sound down the telephone, as if a thousand voices moaned at once.

Sith involuntarily dropped the receiver into place. She listened to her heart thump and thought about what was needed. She fed the printer with the last of her paper. Immediately it began to roll out more photos, and the land line rang again.

She went outside and found the motoboy, waiting patiently for her. She asked him to go and buy two reams of copying paper. At the last moment she added pens and writing paper and matches. He bowed and smiled and bowed again, pleased to have found a patron.

She went back inside, and with just a tremor in her hand picked up the phone.

For the next half hour, she talked to the dead, and found photographs and wrote down names. A woman mourned her children. Sith found photos of them all, and united them, father, mother, three children, uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents, taping their pictures to her wall. The idea of uniting families appealed. She began to stick the other photos onto her wall.

Someone called from outside and there on her doorstep was the motoboy, balancing paper and pens. "I bought you some soup." The broth came in neatly tied bags and was full of rice and prawns. She thanked him and paid him well and he beamed at her and bowed again and again.

All afternoon, the pictures kept coming. Darkness fell, the phone rang, the names were written, until Sith's hand, which was unused to writing anything, ached.

The doorbell rang, and on the doorstep, the motoboy sompiahed. "Excuse me, Lady, it is very late. I am worried for you. Can I get you dinner?"

Sith had to smile. He sounded motherly in his concern. They are so good at building a relationship with you, until you cannot do without them. In the old days she would have sent him away with a few rude words. Now she sent him away with an order.

And wrote.

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And when he came back, the aged motoboy looked so happy. "I bought you fruit as well, Lady," he said, and added, shyly. "You do not need to pay me for that."

Something seemed to bump under Sith, as if she was on a motorcycle, and she heard herself say, "Come inside. Have some food too."

The motoboy sompiahed in gratitude and as soon as he entered, the phone stopped ringing.

They sat on the floor. He arched his neck and looked around at the walls.

"Are all these people your family?" he asked.

She whispered. "No. They're ghosts who no one mourns."

"Why do they come to you?" His mouth fell open in wonder.

"Because my father was Pol Pot," said Sith, without thinking.

The motoboy sompiahed. "Ah." He chewed and swallowed and arched his head back again. "That must be a terrible thing. Everybody hates you."

Sith had noticed that wherever she sat in the room, the eyes in the photographs were directly on her. "I haven't done anything," said Sith.

"You're doing something now," said the motoboy. He nodded and stood up, sighing with satisfaction. Life was good with a full stomach and a patron. "If you need me, Lady, I will be outside."

Photo after photo, name after name.

Youk Achariya: touring dancer

Proeung Chhay: school superintendent

Sar Kothida child, aged 7, died of 'swelling disease'

Sar Makara, her mother, nurse

Nath Mittapheap, civil servant, from family of farmers

Chor Monirath: wife of award-winning engineer

Yin Sokunthea: Khmer Rouge commune leader

She looked at the faces and realized. *Dara, I'm doing this for Dara.*

The City around her went quiet and she became aware that it was now very late indeed. Perhaps she should just make sure the motoboy had gone home.

He was still waiting outside.

"It's okay. You can go home. Where do you live?"

He waved cheerfully north. "Oh, on Monivong, like you." He grinned at the absurdity of the comparison.

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A new idea took sudden form. Sith said, "Tomorrow, can you come early, with a big feast? Fish and rice and greens and pork: curries and stir-fries and kebabs." She paid him handsomely, and finally asked him his name. His name meant Golden.

"Good night, Sovann."

For the rest of the night she worked quickly like an answering service. This is like a cleaning of the house before a festival, she thought. The voices of the dead became ordinary, familiar. Why are people afraid of the dead? The dead can't hurt you. The dead want what you want: justice.

The wall of faces became a staircase and a garage and a kitchen of faces, all named. She had found Jorani's colored yarn, and linked family members into trees.

She wrote until the electric lights looked discolored, like a headache. She asked the ghosts, "Please can I sleep now?" The phones fell silent and Sith slumped with relief onto the polished marble floor.

She woke up dazed, still on the marble floor. Sunlight flooded the room. The faces in the photographs no longer looked swollen and bruised. Their faces were not accusing or mournful. They smiled down on her. She was among friends.

With a whine, the printer started to print; the phone started to ring. Her doorbell chimed, and there was Sovann, white cardboard boxes piled up on the back of his motorcycle. He wore the same shirt as yesterday, a cheap blue copy of a Lacoste. A seam had parted under the arm. He only has one shirt, Sith realized. She imagined him washing it in a basin every night.

Sith and Sovann moved the big tables to the front windows. Sith took out her expensive tablecloths for the first time, and the bronze platters. The feast was laid out as if at New Year. Sovann had bought more paper and pens. He knew what they were for. "I can help, Lady."

He was old enough to have lived in a country with schools, and he could write in a beautiful, old-fashioned hand. Together he and Sith spelled out the names of the dead and burned them.

"I want to write the names of my family too," he said. He burnt them weeping.

The delicious vapors rose. The air was full of the sound of breathing in. Loose papers stirred with the breeze. The ash filled the basins, but even

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after working all day, Sith and the motoboy had only honored half the names.

"Good night, Sovann," she told him.

"You have transferred a lot of merit," said Sovann, but only to be polite.

If I have any merit to transfer, thought Sith.

He left and the printers started, and the phone. She worked all night, and only stopped because the second ream of paper ran out.

The last picture printed was of Kol Vireakboth.

Dara, she promised herself. *Dara next.*

In the morning, she called him. "Can we meet at lunchtime for another walk by the river?"

Sith waited on top of the marble wall and watched an old man fish in the Tonlé Sap river and found that she loved her country. She loved its tough, smiling, uncomplaining people, who had never offered her harm, after all the harm her family had done them. Do you know you have the daughter of the monster sitting here among you?

Suddenly all Sith wanted was to be one of them. The monks in the pavilion, the white-shirted functionaries scurrying somewhere, the lazy bones dangling their legs, the young men who dress like American rappers and sold something dubious, drugs, or sex.

She saw Dara sauntering toward her. He wore his new shirt, and smiled at her but he didn't look relaxed. It had been two days since they'd met. He knew something was wrong, that she had something to tell him. He had bought them lunch in a little cardboard box. Maybe for the last time, thought Sith.

They exchanged greetings, almost like cousins. He sat next to her and smiled and Sith giggled in terror at what she was about to do.

Dara asked, "What's funny?"

She couldn't stop giggling. "Nothing is funny. Nothing." She sighed in order to stop and terror tickled her and she spurted out laughter again. "I lied to you. Kol Vireakboth is not my father. Another politician was my father. Someone you've heard of...."

The whole thing was so terrifying and absurd that the laughter squeezed her like a fist and she couldn't talk. She laughed and wept at the same time. Dara stared.

"My father was Saloth Sar. That was his real name." She couldn't

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make herself say it. She could tell a motoboy, but not Dara? She forced herself onward. "My father was Pol Pot."

Nothing happened.

Sitting next to her, Dara went completely still. People strolled past; boats bobbed on their moorings.

After a time Dara said, "I know what you are doing."

That didn't make sense. "Doing? What do you mean?"

Dara looked sour and angry. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah." He sat, looking away from her. Sith's laughter had finally shuddered to a halt. She sat peering at him, waiting. "I told you my family were modest," he said quietly.

"Your family are lovely!" Sith exclaimed.

His jaw thrust out. "They had questions about you too, you know."

"I don't understand."

He rolled his eyes. He looked back 'round at her. "There are easier ways to break up with someone."

He jerked himself to his feet and strode away with swift determination, leaving her sitting on the wall.

Here on the riverfront, everyone was equal. The teenage boys lounged on the wall; poor mothers herded children; the foreigners walked briskly, trying to look as if they didn't carry moneybelts. Three fat teenage girls nearly swerved into a cripple in a pedal chair and collapsed against each other with raucous laughter.

Sith did not know what to do. She could not move. Despair humbled her, made her hang her head.

I've lost him.

The sunlight seemed to settle next to her, washing up from its reflection on the wake of some passing boat.

No you haven't.

The river water smelled of kindly concern. The sounds of traffic throbbed with forbearance.

Not yet.

There is no forgiveness in Cambodia. But there are continual miracles of compassion and acceptance.

Sith appreciated for just a moment the miracles. The motoboy buying her soup. She decided to trust herself to the miracles.

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Sith talked to the sunlight without making a sound. *Grandfather Vireakboth. Thank you. You have told me all I need to know.*

Sith stood up and from nowhere, the motoboy was there. He drove her to the Hello Phone shop.

Dara would not look at her. He bustled back and forth behind the counter, though there was nothing for him to do. Sith talked to him like a customer. "I want to buy a mobile phone," she said, but he would not answer. "There is someone I need to talk to."

Another customer came in. She was a beautiful daughter too, and he served her, making a great show of being polite. He complimented her on her appearance. "Really, you look cool." The girl looked pleased. Dara's eyes darted in Sith's direction.

Sith waited in the chair. This was home for her now. Dara ignored her. She picked up her phone and dialed his number. He put it to his ear and said, "Go home."

"You are my home," she said.

His thumb jabbed the C button.

She waited. Shadows lengthened.

"We're closing," he said, standing by the door without looking at her.

Shamefaced, Sith ducked away from him, through the door.

Outside Soriya, the motoboy played dice with his fellows. He stood up. "They say I am very lucky to have Pol Pot's daughter as a client."

There was no discretion in Cambodia, either. Everyone will know now, Sith realized.

At home, the piles of printed paper still waited for her. Sith ate the old, cold food. It tasted flat, all its savor sucked away. The phones began to ring. She fell asleep with the receiver propped against her ear.

The next day, Sith went back to Soriya with a box of the printed papers.

She dropped the box onto the blue plastic counter of Hello Phones.

"Because I am Pol Pot's daughter," she told Dara, holding out a sheaf of pictures toward him. "All the unmourned victims of my father are printing their pictures on my printer. Here. Look. These are the pictures of people who lost so many loved ones there is no one to remember them."

She found her cheeks were shaking and that she could not hold the sheaf of paper. It tumbled from her hands, but she stood back, arms folded.

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Dara, quiet and solemn, knelt and picked up the papers. He looked at some of the faces. Sith pushed a softly crumpled green card at him. Her family ID card.

He read it. Carefully, with the greatest respect, he put the photographs on the countertop along with the ID card.

"Go home, Sith," he said, but not unkindly.

"I said," she had begun to speak with vehemence but could not continue. "I told you. My home is where you are."

"I believe you," he said, looking at his feet.

"Then...." Sith had no words.

"It can never be, Sith," he said. He gathered up the sheaf of photocopying paper. "What will you do with these?"

Something made her say, "What will *you* do with them?"

His face was crossed with puzzlement.

"It's your country too. What will you do with them? Oh, I know, you're such a poor boy from a poor family, who could expect anything from you? Well, you have your whole family and many people have no one. And you can buy new shirts and some people only have one."

Dara held out both hands and laughed. "Sith?" *You, Sith are accusing* me *of being selfish*?

"You own them too." Sith pointed to the papers, to the faces. "You think the dead don't try to talk to you, too?"

Their eyes latched. She told him what he could do. "I think you should make an exhibition. I think Hello Phones should sponsor it. You tell them that. You tell them Pol Pot's daughter wishes to make amends and has chosen them. Tell them the dead speak to me on their mobile phones."

She spun on her heel and walked out. She left the photographs with him.

That night she and the motoboy had another feast and burned the last of the unmourned names. There were many thousands.

The next day she went back to Hello Phones.

"I lied about something else," she told Dara. She took out all the reports from the fortunetellers. She told him what Hun Sen's fortuneteller had told her. "The marriage is particularly well favored."

"Is that true?" He looked wistful.

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"You should not believe anything I say. Not until I have earned your trust. Go consult the fortunetellers for yourself. This time you pay."

His face went still and his eyes focused somewhere far beneath the floor. Then he looked up, directly into her eyes. "I will do that."

For the first time in her life Sith wanted to laugh for something other than fear. She wanted to laugh for joy.

"Can we go to lunch at Lucky7?" she asked.

"Sure," he said.

All the telephones in the shop, all of them, hundreds all at once began to sing.

A waterfall of trills and warbles and buzzes, snatches of old songs or latest chart hits. Dara stood dumbfounded. Finally he picked one up and held it to his ear.

"It's for you," he said and held out the phone for her.

There was no name or number on the screen.

Congratulations, dear daughter, said a warm kind voice.

"Who is this?" Sith asked. The options were severely limited.

Your new father, said Kol Vireakboth. The sound of wind. *I adopt you.*

A thousand thousand voices said at once, *We adopt you.*

IN CAMBODIA, you share your house with ghosts in the way you share it with dust. You hear the dead shuffling alongside your own footsteps. You can sweep, but the sound does not go away.

On the Tra Bek end of Monivong there is a house whose owner has given it over to ghosts. You can try to close the front door. But the next day you will find it hanging open. Indeed you can try, as the neighbors did, to nail the door shut. It opens again.

By day, there is always a queue of five or six people wanting to go in, or hanging back, out of fear. Outside are offerings of lotus or coconuts with embedded josh sticks.

The walls and floors and ceilings are covered with photographs. The salon, the kitchen, the stairs, the office, the empty bedrooms, are covered with photographs of Chinese-Khmers at weddings, Khmer civil servants on picnics, Chams outside their mosques, Vietnamese holding up prize catches of fish; little boys going to school in shorts; cyclopousse drivers in

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front of their odd, old-fashioned pedaled vehicles; wives in stalls stirring soup. All of them are happy and joyful, and the background is Phnom Penh when it was the most beautiful city in Southeast Asia.

All the photographs have names written on them in old-fashioned handwriting.

On the table is a printout of thousands of names on slips of paper. Next to the table are matches and basins of ash and water. The implication is plain. Burn the names and transfer merit to the unmourned dead.

Next to that is a small printed sign that says in English HELLO.

Every Pchum Ben, those names are delivered to temples throughout the city. Gold foil is pressed onto each slip of paper, and attached to it is a parcel of sticky rice. At 8 A.M. food is delivered for the monks, steaming rice and fish, along with bolts of new cloth. At 10 A.M. more food is delivered, for the disabled and the poor.

And most mornings a beautiful daughter of Cambodia is seen walking beside the confluence of the Tonlé Sap and Mekong rivers. Like Cambodia, she plainly loves all things modern. She dresses in the latest fashion. Cambodian R&B whispers in her ear. She pauses in front of each new waterfront construction whether built by improvised scaffolding or erected with cranes. She buys noodles from the grumpy vendors with their tiny stoves. She carries a book or sits on the low marble wall to write letters and look at the boats, the monsoon clouds, and the dop-dops. She talks to the reflected sunlight on the river and calls it Father.

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F&SF COMPETITION #72

"Haunted by the Ghostwriter"

FOR competition #72, writers had to perform the task of "ghostwriter" of well-known authors. The entrants were most haunted by H. P. Lovecraft, his specter inspiring a healthy percentage of entries. Other frequent poltergeists included Dr. Seuss, A. A. Milne, and Philip K. Dick.

Some submitters did not specify the authors they were sending up. Unless they were screamingly obvious (see Lovecraft), I had to shoot them down.

Thanks to all the people who submitted. Many of these pieces were extremely funny, and it was a difficult competition to judge. Here are the ones I enjoyed the most.

FIRST PLACE:
Stephen Hawking ghostwrites for Dr. Seuss:

I do not like this wobbly thing,
this wriggly ring, this wiggly string.
I do not like it, Albert E.,
for now you're obsolete, you see.
Our world is all Kaluża-Klein
and oozy, foamy, weird spacetime,
where quantum tunnels, funnels, sleds
let apples slide through Newton's head!

—Mariam Kirby
Mineola, TX

SECOND PLACE:
Stephen Baxter ghostwrites for Louis L'Amour:

Sheriff Hawking stared down his nemesis, the Singularity Kid. His mind raced through the variables. What small permutation in space-time was required to make him victorious? As the hot lead entered his chest, he was consoled by mathematical Providence that somewhere, in some time, he was paying more attention.

—Coy Blair
Thomasville, NC

HONORABLE MENTIONS:
Alfred Bester ghostwrites for *The Home Distillation Handbook*, by Ola Norrman:

Drunker, said the Drunkard.
Drunker, said the Drunkard.

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Fermentation, distillation, dissipation has begun.

—Matthew Herreshoff
Detroit, MI

J. R. R. Tolkien ghostwrites for William R. Gibson:

Once, in his parents' basement, there lived a nerd. This was not a neat and tidy basement, with the dishes clean and the books and clothes all neatly put away. This was a nerd basement, and that means squalor.

—Alan Kellogg
San Diego, CA

Edgar Allan Poe ghostwrites for Isaac Asimov:

Once again, a meeting dreary
stalls our catalogues of theory,
our great work here on Trantor.
Hari Seldon's constant yapping
wastes our time. I should be napping.
I'd doze now, except, of course, I
snore.
Anacreon proclaims defiance.
What's that have to do with science?
Hari's meetings! Bah and Nevermore!

—Pat Scannell
Framingham, MA

DISHONORABLE MENTIONS:

Steven Brust ghostwrites for Jane Austen:

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a lithe and skillful bodyguard to watch his back.

—Michael Cavallo
Brookline, MA

J. G. Ballard ghostwrites for Arthur Conan Doyle:

Yes, Watson, it's clear: the dead astronaut in the empty swimming pool was killed by psycho-analysis. The cerise tunnel of the sunset and the tangled wreckage of the lunar perambulator are absolute proofs. It's murder, Watson, and what's more, I can name the sociologist who did it!

—Stephen McGarrity
N. Yorks, United Kingdom

J. K. Rowling ghostwrites for Dan Brown (or visa-versa):

The Wizarding World — a European secret subculture founded in 4000 BCE — is a real society. The Ministry of Magic has just completed construction of a 47 million Galleon school called Hogwarts somewhere in England.

All descriptions of magic, architecture, wizardry, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.

—Timothy Hulme, Jr.
Union, NJ

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F&SF COMPETITION #73

Merge and Converge:

Take at least one genre book (or short story) and merge it with another name. Then describe the plot of your new creation. (Thanks to Richard Bleiler via Gordon Van Gelder for the suggestion.) Limit your description to fifty words, and submit no more than six entries. Remember to include your name and address.

Example: *Foundation and Empire Strikes Back*
(from *Foundation and Empire* and *The Empire Strikes Back*)

Hari Seldon goes to Dagobah to learn the ways of the Jedi and become powerful enough to defeat the Mule. Unfortunately for Hari, the Mule is his father.

RULES: Send entries to Competition Editor, *F&SF*, 240 West 73rd St. #1201, New York, NY 10023-2794, or e-mail entries to carol@cybrid.net. Be sure to include your contact information. Entries must be received by November 15, 2006. Judges are the editors of *F&SF*, and their decision is final. All entries become the property of *F&SF*.

PRIZES: First prize will receive a signed, limited edition of *Majestrum* by Matthew Hughes (published by Night Shade Books). Second prize will receive advance reading copies of three forthcoming novels. Any runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to *F&SF*. Results of Competition #73 will appear in the April 2007 issue.

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CURIOSITIES

BLACK OXEN, BY GERTRUDE ATHERTON (1923)

THE TITLE of this still-provocative, still-timely Roaring Twenties bestseller (filmed the year after publication) derives from a Yeats epigraph: "The years like great black oxen tread the world...." Indeed, a heavy sense of inexorable mortality suffuses this tale.

Lee Clavering is a thirty-four-year-old drama critic in New York when he sees a mysterious, uncannily beautiful young woman at the theater. He falls instantly in love. Seeking information on this European countess, Mary Zatianny, he is baffled by her resemblance to the youthful Mary Ogden, now an elderly, expatriate socialite. After jousting with the woman, he learns her secret: she is indeed Mary Ogden, aged fifty-eight, but restored to youth by Viennese radiation treatments on her ovaries. She avows her love for Clavering as well. But the eventual disclosure of her secret focuses the media and jealous rivals on her, making for a less-than-ideal romantic atmosphere. Moreover, Mary Zatianny's young body is in conflict with her jaded mind. Clavering is courting Haggard's Ayesha.

Ripe with mordant social observation, trenchantly written, this novel results from Atherton's own identical Steinach treatments at age sixty-four, which she swore woke her from a mental and physical torpor. In portraying Mary Zatianny as the first of a new science-derived clade that would marry the energies of youth with the icy cunning of age, Atherton (1857-1948) was an Extropian before the word was invented. Bruce Sterling obviously agrees, since his novel *Holy Fire* (1996) features a protagonist in an analogous situation. Her name? Mia Ziemann.

—Paul Di Filippo

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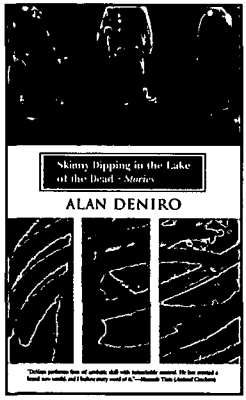
Skinny Dipping in the Lake of the Dead: Stories
Alan DeNiro



A MAN LOSES his leg in a war, and a field doctor sews on a fairy tale in its place. A woman excavates her living room in order to discover what has become of her marriage. The Byzantine army invades a small college town. The secret history of Erie—past, present, and future—is revealed.

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A Book Sense Pick

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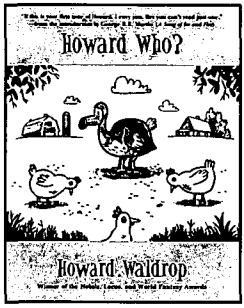
Howard Waldrop



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